MAMMOTH
WESTERN
Peace Officer of Sundown
By William G. Bogart
THE MAN WHO TAMED TOMBSTONE
By LES SAVAGE, Jr.
JANUARY 25¢
CANADA 30¢

the Author CONFESSES

Meet William G. Bogart, author of several detective novels and many short stories, who gives you the low-down on writing for a living.

PEOPLE—readers like you—often say to me: "Where do you get all your ideas for stories?" That seems to be the outstanding question in anyone's mind who *isn't* a writer. Friends have asked me this. Would-be scribes who have never sold a line of copy have asked it. Readers ask it. And some people get the idea that professional writers merely gaze into a crystal ball or have some magic power.

Don't you believe it! Like scores of other people, I always *wanted* to write. So I joined a writer's club. We wrote very arty pieces that, on occasion, brought nice little personal notes from Esquire. But no checks. One day I picked up a writer's magazine and found the name of an agent. He had a good name. So I laid some money on the line and told this agent I wanted to be a writer. He helped me. He really did. We made a couple of sales.

But those few scattered sales were a long way from supporting a wife and kids. So what did I do? How could I learn more about this business? I took a job as a manuscript reader with Street and Smith Publications in New York. *That* ought to be the way . . . being right in there on the inside with the editors.

It was! I learned plenty in those years as I worked my way up to a job as associate editor of two magazines. I saw it from the *editor's* side of the fence. The hell with this stuff with writing pretty stories that suited only *me*. The editor had a *public* to satisfy. And did they scream when he didn't publish stuff that held action and mystery and suspense.

So, on the side, I kept writing. New markets opened up. I *talked* to editors and learned exactly what they needed. Then I tried to fill the bill for them for their readers.

IDEAS? I wrote simply about the things I *knew*. My first book—HELL ON FRIDAY—used the magazine publishing business as its background. Don't get the idea you have to be a world-wide traveler in order to write. I've been a manager of chain restaurants, driven big transport trucks, and have pounded out copy in one of the country's largest advertising agencies.

The result: every one of those backgrounds has furnished me with story material. My next book will use the advertising agency background combined with the operations of a big transport airline. Because I wrote advertising for the airline!

You pick things that a lot of people would like to *know* about. Surely there's something in your life about which you know *more* than the other fellow. All right—build a story around that background. Build some suspense into it. Give it feeling and life and a little heart-throb. Create some characters who live and breathe.

Hard? You bet it is. Writing isn't a fuddy-duddy's job. You sweat it out just like you work hard at *anything* that is worthwhile.

This is a funny kind of an autobiography, isn't it. But I'm basing it on experience. People don't ask questions about me . . . what do I eat, what is the color of my hair, etc. Mainly, they want to know how I *get* that way . . . how I started writing, where I get ideas. Maybe you want to do the *same* some day.

So I'm telling you. I'm just a regular guy. As I said, I don't have any magical abilities. I *work* at it. I'll bet you could do the same!

THE war's over, so it can't be war hysteria; you readers must like our new baby, MAMMOTH WESTERN—or was that loud rushing sound just another atom bomb? Anyway, the "all sold out" sign was hung up on the newsstands so fast your complacent editor was out of luck when he sauntered out to buy his copy. Yep, we always buy the first copy of a new magazine we edit—just for luck. Any of you guys know where that first copy is? We were just too late!

SO, REALIZING that you readers liked what we gave you in the first issue, we got some mighty big ideas, and went out to get something even better. We think we got it. A quick analysis of the stories in this issue will show you what we mean.

TAKE Les Savage, Jr.; he's got a very fine novelet in this issue called "The Man Who Tamed Tombstone." First, Savage is one of the top western pulpateers in America, and when he writes 'em they stay writ! This one's historical in flavor, and we think it's authentic. You'll like this story for a lot of reasons, the best of which is that this author works hard to make perfection.

NEXT take Norrell Gregory. Now you've got a slick writer! This writer appears in the "better" magazines, the ones with smooth paper—which is why he's in MAMMOTH WESTERN. At least WE think it's best, and as long as you readers keep on buying us out, we'll be justified. Anyway, "Bread of the Ingrate" is everything a good western ought to be, and you'll admit Mr. Gregory belongs in the slicks—when he isn't in MAMMOTH WESTERN.

SLICK writer number two—James C. Lynch. Told you we went out and done things. Mr. Lynch has "Angels With Spurs" riding MAMMOTH WESTERN'S range, and we think you'll find it a delightful bit; just a trifle impossible, but the kind of impossibility we all day-dream about. It's about two beautiful gals who . . . dang it, read it for yourself!

POPULAR gal of our first issue was Ennen Reaves Hall. So she's back again with a new one called "Eve Was No Lady." Well, that may not exactly be the truth—we kinda liked the lady in this yarn, and we like the lady who wrote it. You'll like her too! Even more'n before!

ONE of the best fantasy and science fiction writers we ever had just got out of the air force, and the announcement gave us a grand idea—why not have him do us a western? Well, he did it, and we think you'll find "Wild Killer" has the quality that made him an American Favorite for many years in other fields.

WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER is like saying "pass the porterhouse steak, not too rare." He's been writing westerns a heck of a long time—longer than we've been editing them, for sure! And that means only one thing. We've got a theory about writers—every million words is a milestone—and Mr. Overholser has a lot of milestones. "Sign on the Bullet Line" is as neat a professional job as we've seen in months.

"PEACE OFFICER OF SUNDOWN" is William G. Bogart's offering for this iss . . . huh? You already been introduced? Well, okay then, why waste our breath. You *know* he's good.

NEW Author S. M. Tenneshaw's "Holster Heritage" got our nod because of the romantic realism and the tear-jerking power of his story. Somehow western stories lend themselves to this kind of writing, and we're mighty glad he turned his newly found talents in our direction first. Keep it up, Tenneshaw.

BRAG, brag, brag—that's us. But after all, this is the editor's column, and if you ever drop into this office, you'll find out we're just that way. We had a horoscope cast the other day and we cast it in the wastebasket. Modesty, you know. All that bunk about being egotistic was just too much for us to broadcast, so we are willing to forget it. However, really, don't you think all those letters you wrote to us were rather unfair? How could we avoid a swelled head with that sort of a reception?

ANYWAY, read this issue, and let us know if it's an improvement—and then read the *next* issue, because it's got a yarn in it that'll eat your heart out! Stephen Payne, no less, who does his stuff regularly in *Satevepost*. Why say, your editor has rejection slips from *that* magazine too! See what we mean? *Rap*

All STORIES Complete

HOLSTER HERITAGE (Novelet—22,000) ..... by S. M. Tenneshaw 6
Illustrated by Arnold Kohn
The valley was ruled by a Brandt and Larry was a Brandt—but the Brandts had a killer reputation!

WILD KILLER (Short—4,000) ..... by Robert Moore Williams .. 44
Illustrated by Robert Fuqua
A baby mountain lion is only a kitty, and it plays like one—but when it grows up it's a killer.

EVE WAS NO LADY (Short—4,300) ..... by Ennen Reaves Hall 52
Illustrated by Arnold Kohn
Women are all the same, from the Garden of Eden on down. Even when they fall off their horses!

THE MAN WHO TAMED TOMBSTONE
(Novelet—16,000) ..... by Les Savage, Jr. 66
Illustrated by Stanley Greenlaw
The Kid wasn't the type you'd expect to tame a rip-roaring town like Tombstone—but he did it!

ANGELS WITH SPURS (Short—5,000) ..... by James C. Lynch 102
Illustrated by Rod Ruth
Slim and Jingles were their names—two purty, and worthless (?) gals who'd be no help nohow . . .

PEACE OFFICER OF SUNDOWN (Novelet—10,000) by William G. Bogart 112
Illustrated by Arnold Kohn
Jim Mason had only one thing in mind, peace. But in Sundown finding peace is a matter of making it.

BREAD OF THE INGRATE (Short—4,000) ..... by Norrell Gregory 136
Illustrated by Robert Fuqua
Some people don't appreciate bread; they've got to have cake—even if it doesn't agree with them.

THE HOLDUP AT JORDAN CREEK (Short—8,600) .. by Giff Cheshire 146
Illustrated by Brady
This was a queer holdup—it was telegraphed as a message of love; and it meant hot water for Lance.

SIGN ON THE BULLET LINE (Short—5,000) ..... by Wayne D. Overholser 162
Illustrated by Rod Ruth
Sometimes an honest man will sign a contract without looking. Most honest men are too trusting!

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Front Cover painting by H. W. McCauley illustrating a scene from "The Man Who Tamed Tombstone"
Back Cover painting by Joe W. Tillotson presenting "Wild Bill Hickok"

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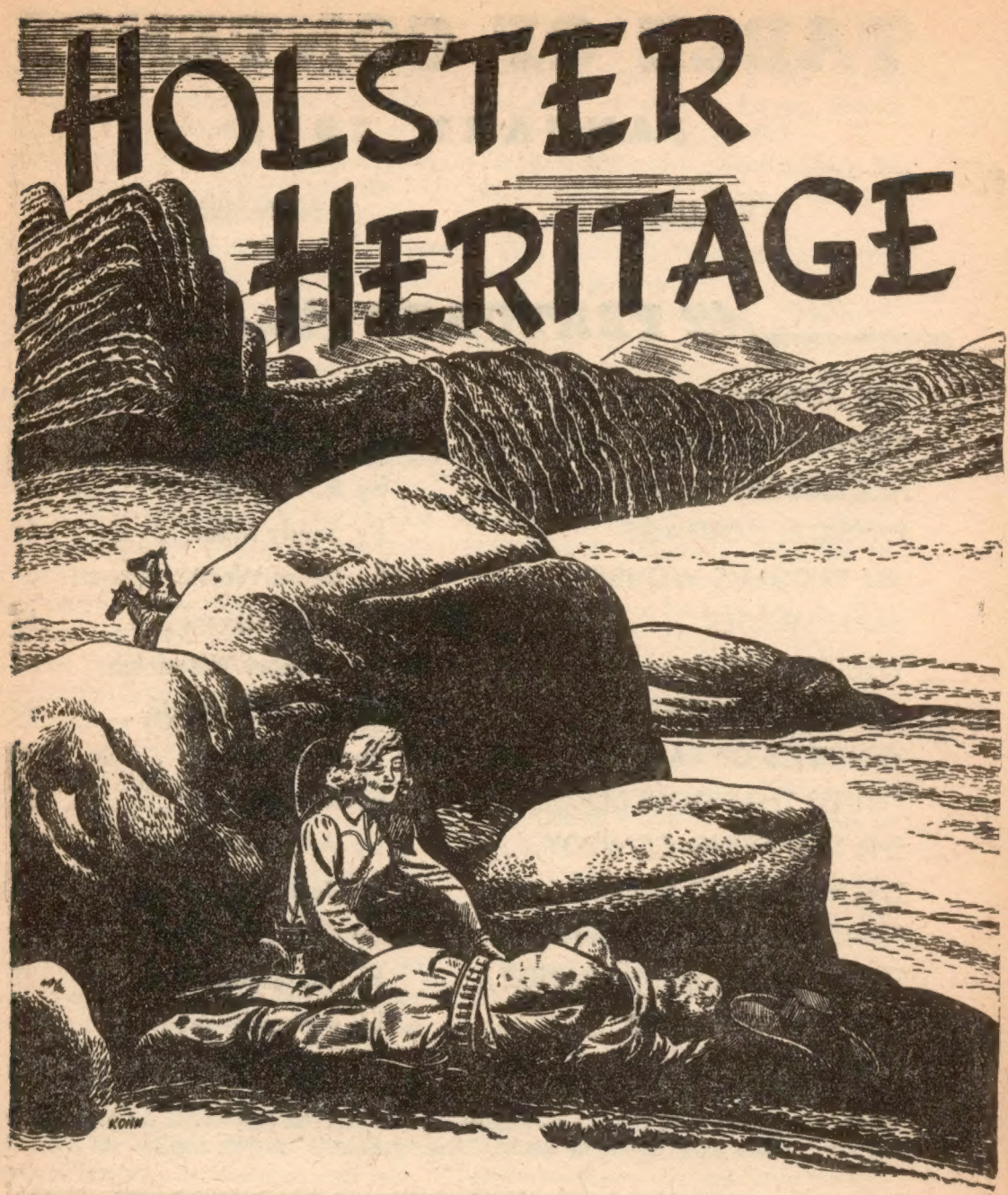
Volume 2 Number 1

HOLSTER HERITAGE



By S. M. Tenneshaw

LARRY BRANDT reined his horse to a champing halt on the rocky trail he had traversed since dawn. Behind him lay the narrow pass marking the only entrance to the valley now spread in magnificent panorama before him. Down on that rolling grassland, he knew, were the richest spreads

Larry had only one link with his heritage, a mysteriously initialed gun

in the Southwest.

His position was high on the east rim of the valley, which was some eighty miles long by about twenty wide. The river meandered through the middle of it, but from here no sign of water was visible, the purple haze of distance hiding it effectively. Here and there were scattered green-and-white clumps of cottonwood and elm. On the far side rose the grim peaks of snow-capped mountains. And somewhere, still some seven or eight miles away, was Miraldo, largest and toughest of the valley's two towns.

But from where Brandt sat, only beauty could be seen.

"So this is Paradise Valley," he spoke aloud. "No wonder Mother loved it!"

For long minutes he sat astride his halt-welcome mount, rolling, lighting and enjoying a cigarette as he drank in the scene appreciatively. But with observation of each verdant section of the valley, puzzlement grew in the clear grayness of his eyes.

"It's beautiful!" he muttered, then in incredulity, "Why did she leave? Why!"

The last was an exclamation, rather than a question. The problems that had been uppermost in his thoughts for long days since he set out from St. Louis now became unfathomable mysteries with sight of his destination.

Larry Brandt typically Western in his virile, rangy build; but his sun-reddened face, not yet browned to normal tan, spoke strongly of newness to the West. Still, he gave the impression of being far from physically soft. His gray eyes were unwavering candor; his jaw lean and square and jutting. His nose was straight, nostrils fine and not too narrow.

His slim, straight fingers momentarily rumpled curly brown hair, then roved down to the dark leather holster, peculiarly chased and inlaid with silver, at his hip. Its well-preserved leather glistened satiny in the sunlight. Jutting almost brutally from its flapless top was the dull black of a walnut-butted six-gun, also immaculately glistening and oiled in its metal parts. Narrow strips of age-yellowed inlaid ivory did little to break the grimness of the blackened wood.

To a practiced observer it might have been evident that Larry Brandt wore the weapon with an unaccustomed air, though the fingers which now stroked its butt suggesting incredible speed even while at rest.

He drew the gun from its holster and looked thoughtfully at the ivory letters "J.D." inlaid neatly on the base of the butt. As he mused he heard again his dying mother's words, as she insisted on buckling the gun and holster to his hip with her last waning strength.

"Wear it always, Larry," she had said, her weakening tones barely audible, "and go back to Paradise Valley. Your father . . ."

Here he had wondered at the hesitation in her voice. Had it been due to weakness; or to something else he hadn't fathomed? He hadn't been able to decide.

"Your father rules it all now," she had resumed. "He will give you what is justly yours. Perhaps more, because he wanted you as much as I, even though he hated . . ."

Again the hesitation, then swift resumption that forestalled the question forming on his lips.

"But, my son, remember this: nothing belongs to you except the Bar Forty ranch. That was mine alone. Take it and work it honestly. The valley needs an honest man, but it needs one with courage. It will be hard, my son, because you will be alone, but I feel that some day, somewhere in the valley,

you will find . . ."

With that she had died, fingers dropping reluctantly away from the smooth leather holster.

J.D. What did those mysterious letters mean? Who was the man who had once owned the old, but beautifully fashioned six-gun? How had his mother gotten it? Why hadn't she told him as she died whose it was? And why had she given it to him with such anxious earnestness?

Shoving the gun thoughtfully back into its gleaming holster, he dug his spurs gently into his rested horse's ribs and began to thread his way along the gradually sloping trail that led to the valley floor.

The way led down with many turns, about huge boulders, and here and there gnarled, wind-twisted conifers that added to the beauty of the scene. Brand made good progress toward the timber line, and gradually the trees blotted out all view of the valley. The slope became less precipitous.

Suddenly the stinging whip-crack of a rifle shot vibrated through the air.

STARTLED by the unexpected noise, Brandt brought his horse to a pawing halt.

The sound of the shot still echoed down from the rocks above with a dry solidness that indicated its source was not far distant. Three more reports came, fired rapidly and machinelike. These sounded clear and ringing, originating much closer than had the first. After another fusillade of echoes the valleyside resumed its normal outdoor silence.

Dismounting hurriedly, Brandt led his horse off the trail, tossing the reins to the ground, then made his way down the trail. He kept to the side in the shadow of the trees, his gun gripped in ready fingers. A quarter of a mile he went before the trail leveled, opening into a tiny clearing, rock-strewn and grassy. Across it the ground rose again, tipping slightly over a rise before again dropping valleyward. Brandt stopped, eyes fixed on a significant scene in the clearing.

Behind a projecting boulder was the figure of a girl. She was kneeling over the limp form of a man, lying where she had evidently dragged him. To one side stood two horses, noses lifted, still snorting in the direction of the opposite slope.

Brandt could see the bloodstains on the man's whitened hair even from where he stood, and it was impossible to mistake the truth. The man was dead.

The girl's slim shoulders were shaking, her sobs audible across the intervening space. Her shoulder-long hair glowed rich brown in the sunlight. Beside her a discarded sombrero lay atop a rifle.

Intently Brandt scanned the opposite slope, noting the places where an assassin could have hidden. He saw nothing. Walking slowly from his concealment, he kept a sharp eye cocked for any sign of motion, ready to dive for the boulders he kept near him during his winding progress toward the grief-stricken girl. But nothing stirred.

As he halted unobserved, perhaps fifty feet behind his goal, she straightened up and leaped to her feet, back still toward him. Raising both clenched fists above her head, she fairly shook them in obvious hate and grief at the slope beyond.

"I'll kill them!" she sobbed. "Every murdering Brandt in the valley! They'll pay, damn them!" She lowered her clenched fists and stared once more down at the dead man before her.

"I'll do it, Daddy," she promised aloud in deadly earnestness, "I'll finish what we started out to do, if it takes my

last breath. I swear it!"

Astounded by the mention of his own name, and amazed at the terrible bitterness of the girl, a bitterness that seemed rooted in something long prior to this latest calamity, Brandt shifted uncomfortably, then coughed slightly to announce his presence.

Instantly, with a speed that rocked him back on his heels, she whirled around. A six-gun whipped from a holster, slung man-fashion from her hip, covering him before he could make a move.

Startled, he shot his arms aloft even as her forefinger whitened with its pressure on the trigger.

"Don't shoot!" he exclaimed. "I'm a friend!"

She stood facing him, the whiteness of her knuckles lessening not a whit, her dark brown eyes probing deep into his own, unwinking, untrusting, even through the tears that glistened in their depths and ran down her cheeks.

"I have no friends!" she snapped. "And you'd better keep those hands up, or you'll find it out!"

EYES wide at the hardness of her tone, he studied her with mounting interest. He thought she couldn't have been more than twenty. She was small, about five-feet-two, athletically built, but well formed. Her face wasn't beautiful, although Brandt imagined the hard bitterness of her tight-pulled lips and her pugnaciously jutting chin and narrowed eyes somehow masked an inherent appeal. Normally, he decided, her lips were full and curved. Her chin was a bit stubborn, true, but not nearly so jutting as her tense-clenched teeth now made it. She had a directness of gaze he sensed would always be there. The eyes themselves were set wide apart, in an honest way, and between the wet-lashed lids he saw their humid brown softness. Her upturned nose suggested sauciness, mirth, and a bit of contrariness. Just above and beside her right eye, on her temple, was a tiny pink birthmark. He decided after a few seconds consideration that it was pretty.

"I still say I'm a friend," Brandt persisted, "and I'm going to lower my hands, in spite of the way you handle that gun."

Cautiously he dropped them, keeping his eyes on her. She watched him unmoved, but he noted the trigger finger was still white and steady.

"Who are you?" she asked tonelessly.

He hesitated a brief second as he finished the slow descent of his arms.

"John Lawrence," he told her, giving his middle name before his first, "but you can call me Larry."

"I'm not calling you anything," she said coldly. "You can keep right on going your way and leave me alone."

He glanced down at the dead man. "What about your Daddy?" he asked bluntly.

For the first time her eyes wavered. She looked down at the limp figure. A sob broke from her lips, then her voice steadied and her gaze returned defiantly to his.

"I'll take care of that myself," she declared through her tears. "And now, will you please go?"

He shook his head.

"No," he said simply. "I won't. And if you don't mind, we'll get your Dad up on his horse. We'll tie him on, then we'll both go on into town. You don't need to trust me if you won't, but I'm staying anyway. It wont' hurt to have two of us together on this trail."

She hesitated an instant, then waved her gun toward the horses.

"Thanks," she shrugged briefly, her voice still cold. "I'll let you do that—lift him on, I mean. Dad weighs a hun-

dred-eighty."

Without another word, Brandt stepped forward stooped and lifted the dead man in his arms. He grunted a bit as he came erect, then walked slowly toward the horse she indicated. It shied.

At that she returned her gun to its holster. Reaching for the reins, she held tightly while he lifted the body to a secure position across the saddle. He drew one of the saddle girths over the body and buckled it down.

"There," he said, "that ought to hold. Now I'll go back up the trail and get my horse, and then we'll get going."

She gave no sign as he turned and retraced his steps, but stood looking after him until he had vanished.

It took him the better part of ten minutes to climb to where he had left his mount. Lifting the reins, he vaulted into the saddle and returned to the clearing where he had left the girl. As he reached it, he drew his horse up with an amazed exclamation.

The clearing was empty!

MOMENTARILY a grin flashed across his face. "Independent little devil!" he exclaimed. But the grin faded as he spurred across the clearing.

"I can't lose sight of her now," he spoke aloud. "Whoever killed her dad might try to kill her. Besides, there's something deep behind all this, because it's a cinch she blames the Brandts for all her trouble."

With brow knit in thought, he urged his horse up the opposite slope until he reached its top. Here three white marks about shoulder high on a large boulder caught his eye. He halted to look at them a moment, a long whistle coming from his lips.

"No wonder the killer beat it!" he burst out. "Each one of those three bullets must have come within inches of him. And she fired those shots as fast as she could pull the trigger!"

He glanced up the trail. "Maybe she don't need any help at that," he muttered in growing admiration.

Once more he spurred forward, reaching a vantage point on the trail in another five minutes. Below him stretched the last slope to the valley floor, the trail winding around in a hairpin course; and far down toward its bend he discerned a cloud of dust. Unmistakably it was the girl with her grim burden.

Brandt scanned the abrupt slope before him with a critical eye, judging its possibilities.

"Looks like it can be done," he decided.

He glanced once more at the two horses below, then whirled his mount off the trail and plunged down the virgin valley-side. He held the reins loosely in his hands, allowing the animal to make its own way forward. All sight of his quarry was lost now, and he was forced to pay strict attention to his progress. But sooner than he had anticipated, he burst through the trees and down a final gravel slope to find himself once more on the trail, evidently well ahead of the girl.

As he stood waiting for her to appear, his eyes wandered down to the dusty trail surface. His lids narrowed. There, plainly imprinted in the yellow dust were hoof-tracks, obviously very recent, since the wind had not yet disturbed them. There was but one set of tracks and they had gone *up*. He stiffened with the realization that somewhere above him—between him and the girl—the killer still lurked.

Hastily gripping the reins over his horse's head, he vaulted from the saddle and plunged up the trail, gun drawn. Rounding a boulder, he came to a sud-

den, stiff-legged halt.

Facing him, legs crouched as though just risen to his feet, was a leather-chapped figure, hatless and with blood on his face from several ugly scratches; blood that he had been trying to wipe away. Behind him was a horse, standing quietly.

Brandt saw his hand streaking for the gun on his thigh, and as it flashed out, he realized with half-felt surprise that the man intended to shoot. Desperately he whipped up his own gun.

The other's weapon belched flame.

Brandt felt something jerk at his head. Then suddenly the sun was shining in his eyes, his sombrero shot away. Aiming instinctively, he heard his own six-gun bark angrily.

The killer whirled half around, clutching at his gun arm. His weapon plopped into the dust several feet away. With amazement Brandt knew he had deliberately aimed at that arm.

Snarling, the man snatched at a second gun on his other hip. It came up lightning fast.

Two more explosions rocked the echoes of the valley slope. Once more Brandt felt the breeze of a passing slug. In a second Brandt saw why the bullet had missed.

His opponent was sagging slowly, the snarl on his face being obliterated by a growing, open-mouthed surprise that seemed replaced in its turn almost instantly by the blankness of death. Squarely in the center of his forehead was a round, red hole.

Brandt watched with puzzled and almost dismayed interest as the killer hit the dry earth with a thud, rolled over once in a little cloud of dust, then lay with sightless eyes staring up the trail. In spite of the fact that he had killed in self-defense, Brandt gaped with dismay at the gun in his hand. Had the unbelievable accuracy and speed he had just displayed really been his own?

"I couldn't have done better myself," came in cool, feminine tones from up trail.

BRANDT whirled around to see the girl staring at him, a strange expression in her brown eyes. She was seated on her horse, rifle across her knees. Even as he turned, the horse bearing her dead father rounded a turn and halted behind her.

"I tried to wing him," Brandt defended slowly, "but he wouldn't quit."

"He wanted it all right," she assured him.

Slinging her rifle under her arm, she dismounted, walking forward until she stood beside the dead man. For a moment she looked down at his body, then her brown eyes met Brandt's. He saw that their assumed hardness was gone.

"I guess I owe you an apology," she said contritely. "You *are* a friend. This is the man who killed Daddy."

"No doubt about it," confirmed Brandt. "He's got your mark on his face."

He took several shells from his belt and replaced the empty cartridges in his weapon. Then he shoved the gun back into its holster and stared curiously at her.

"Now that you're convinced I'm friendly," he suggested, "I think you owe me a little explanation, don't you? First, who are you, and what's this all about?" He waved a hand that included the dead killer and, in general, the whole valley.

She hesitated momentarily, then evidently deciding in favor of something she saw in his eyes, spoke swiftly in low, tense tones, eyes fixed on the valley below, visible through the trees.

"My name is Alice Coyle," she began. "About nineteen years ago, when I was just a baby, Daddy owned a ranch

here in Paradise Valley. But right wasn't might, and he couldn't hold it. A man named Harland Brandt came. He had no soul. He brought killers, desperadoes, rustlers, with him. Gradually he drove out all those who couldn't fight him, killed those who did, and made virtual slaves of those who remained. Daddy and a few other ranchers tried to fight back, but they never had a chance against his methods.

"One night my mother was murdered, shot dead by one of Brandt's skulking killers when he mistook her for Daddy through the window. Dad nearly went mad for awhile, I guess, but finally he realized he couldn't fight Brandt's paid killers alone, and he had me to consider. So he fled. And I guess that's all there is to it."

"I see," said Brandt in dazed tones, slowly absorbing the import of the story he had just been told. "And now," he added incredulously, "you've come back single-handed to try to avenge your family?"

She nodded, and her eyes hardened involuntarily.

"For nineteen years Daddy has planned it, and I'm not going to let him down," she said, her voice once more cold and bitter. "I'm here now, ready to fight on even terms with any man; and I'm going to stay until there isn't a Brandt left alive in the valley. The valley has no law, so I'll be my own law. But I'm not going to be exactly alone. Daddy had one friend, a rancher named Will Jackson, who was one of those who stayed under the domination of the Brandts. He's waiting for me."

But Brandt scarcely heard her grim challenge; his brain was still refusing to accept the incredible story her lips had told him. He rolled a dry tongue about in a mouth that was tense-lipped and tight.

Harland Brandt, his own father, a killer! It was impossible!

"How do you know it was a Brandt who killed your mother?" he temporized. "And your Dad? A lot of things can happen in nineteen years, you know."

She looked at him a moment curiously.

"It was a Brandt, both times," she averred positively. "There can't be any mistake. Just look at the brand on that horse," she pointed at the killer's mount, "and you'll see for yourself."

With ice forming in his brain and crystallizing the knowledge of why, in part, his mother had gone from Paradise Valley, he stared at the brand with growing conviction. He didn't need the verbal assurance she now gave him, for there, clearly outlined, was the brand of the Bar Forty!

CHAPTER II

Welcome Home, Son!

MIRALDO'S main street was its only street, and Larry Brandt rode his horse slowly down its dusty middle, sitting easily in his saddle, his hand resting nonchalantly on his gun butt. In spite of his apparent ease, however, his every nerve and fibre was tense and ready for action.

Behind him came Alice, her face set and still a bit tear-stained. In her eyes was that bitter stare seeming to challenge the glance of everyone it met.

Making up the balance of the strange cavalcade were the two horses with their grim, limp burdens of death.

A whisper swept up the street, going ahead of the soft clop of their horses' feet in the dry dust into every frame shack, general store, and saloon, bringing their occupants out into the late afternoon sun.

A two-story saloon about midway

through town seemed to be the most important building, so Brandt headed for it. As they progressed, he scanned every detail about him intently.

The street itself was a sea of powdery dust. The buildings in the main were one-story shacks, with here and there one with two-story pretentiousness, or one with a false second-story front. These more important places were graced with board planking for a walk, approached in each case by one or two steps. A hitching rail fronted most of the buildings.

Brandt looked at each person as he passed. In return they stared in silent curiosity at him, at the girl, and at the corpses strapped to the plodding horses. One group of hard-eyed men stood silent until he had passed, then a startled murmur ran through their ranks.

"Boys, that's Smoke Larson draped acrost that hoss!" exclaimed one.

Brandt's fingers tightened on his gun. He saw the group move slowly in massed pursuit, striding stiff-legged and menacingly.

He reined in his mount before the two-story saloon, sitting quietly a moment. His eyes met those of a man who leaned lazily against the hitching rail with one languid foot in the dust of the street, the other propped up on the lower of two wooden steps leading up to the plank walk.

About forty-seven or -eight years old, Brandt judged him, with his brown hair slightly gray at the temples and still holding a hint of a curl. His eyes were fixed on Brandt's face, regarding him through a wisp of smoke curling up from a cigarette held in his left hand. His right arm hung loosely at his side, and Brandt noted his holster was slung from his left leg. He guessed the man to be left-handed, yet there seemed to be something awkward about the way the hand held the cigarette. All at once it was flipped away, only a third smoked.

Behind, just off the boardwalk, was a group of men standing with impassive features, but somehow there seemed to be secret satisfaction gleaming in their eyes as they stared at the corpse of the man Brandt now knew as Smoke Larson. This contrasted sharply with the attitude of the men crowding behind him.

Another man came out of the saloon now, the only moving figure not already in the dust of the street. On his unbuttoned vest hung a metal star. He took in the cavalcade with a widening stare of surprise, and with a frown that darkened instantly he saw the dead Larson. His gaze shifted back to Brandt, pale blue eyes glowering. Brandt strode slowly forward. Seeming oblivious of the sheriff's presence, the left-handed man blocked his further progress. He still stood in the same position.

"My name's Pete Garland," he said in a pleasing drawl. "What's yours?"

SURPRISED, Brandt's attention returned to the speaker. What was there about this man that made his garrulousness seem artificial?

"My name's John Lawrence," he answered briefly, puzzled.

The sheriff pushed past, down the steps and faced Brandt.

"I'll ask the questions," he growled. "What's th' ruckus, stranger? Where'd you git them dead hombres?"

"You seem to know one of them," returned Brandt.

"He's Smoke Larson, one of th' Bar Forty rannies," snapped the sheriff. "Who killed 'im?"

"I did," said Brandt deliberately and quietly, sensing the ominous stir in the group behind him. "He's a killer. He ambushed this girl and killed her father.

I ran across him further down the trail and he drew on me. I winged him first, but he went for his other gun. He was asking for it."

"That's a nice yarn," sneered the sheriff. "How do I know you ain't a-lyin'?"

"Because I say so," came in cool, clear tones from Alice, who rode her horse up beside Brandt's. "I saw the whole thing."

"An' who're you?" asked the sheriff.

"Alice Coyle," she snapped. "And my father's name was Curtis Coyle. Maybe some of you here will remember that name."

Brandt heard the soft plop as the man named Garland dropped his foot off the step into the dust and stood erect. He was staring at the girl with a queer expression in his eyes. In absolute silence that seemed fraught for the moment with tension, he walked around them both and approached the body of Curtis Coyle. For a long instant he looked at the dead face, then he turned and went wordlessly back to his position, the eyes of all upon him.

"What th' hell yuh sashayin' around for?" snarled the sheriff with obvious perturbation. "Ain't you never seen a dead man?"

Garland looked at him calmly, but with a strange glitter in his gray eyes. "Just curious-like, sheriff," he said. "Ain't meanin' no harm."

The sheriff glared at him. "You're loco," he snapped in disgust, returning his attention to Brandt.

"So you admit killin' Larson?" he resumed belligerently. "Well, this's a law-abidin' country, and we don't allow no strangers killin' our citizens. I'll have to lock you up."

"Larson's got a bullet-hole in his right arm, an' another plumb center between his eyes, Warnett," interrupted Garland, his voice still calm. "He killed him in self-defense, an' he's got a witness. It's all legal-like, sheriff."

A growing murmur came from the group near the boardwalk behind Garland; the sheriff glanced around at them with an uneasy frown. He seemed hesitant, and Brandt sensed the tension in the air. He guessed that Warnett was in some sort of a spot—as though those present were divided into two camps with the sheriff between them. He was sure of it when the man turned toward him.

"Well, maybe so," he grunted in verbal retreat before the mild-mannered Garland. "I reckon you're right about that, Garland, but don't forget, mister Lawrence, I'll be a-watchin' you. We don't want no killers in this valley."

Abruptly he turned and shouldered his way back into the saloon. The group of men behind Brandt moved forward too, stamping up the steps in the wake of the sheriff, each one giving Brandt a baleful scrutiny as they passed. One of them spoke out of the side of his mouth.

"We'll be a-seein' you later," he spat meaningfully.

A MAN stepped off the walk and accosted Brandt. "I'm the undertaker," he announced. "You'll be needin' me, I reckon."

Brandt glanced at Alice, discovering that she was talking to a man who had advanced from the crowd.

"Yes," he said swiftly, "fix everything up and charge it to me. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

The undertaker nodded, and taking the bridles of both horses, led them away with their gruesome burdens.

The calm tones of Pete Garland drew Brandt's attention from Alice.

"For a tenderfoot, you're a danged good shot," he said casually, looking interestedly at Brandt's leather-hol-

stered gun. "Smoke Larson was plenty fast. Where you from?"

"St. Louis," returned Brandt shortly.

"That's an old six-gun you got there," Garland rambled on. "All shined up, too. Musta been well taken care of."

"Mind if I ask a question?" interrupted Brandt, a trifle annoyed at the man's curiosity.

"Sure not," said Garland cordially. "Just go right ahead, lad."

"Where can I find Harland Brandt?"

"Brandt, eh?" Garland's eyes were suddenly glittering. "Well, I reckon you won't have much trouble a-findin' *him*. He's th' big boss in this valley. His ranch is th' Circle Ten. It's about four miles straight through town—first spread on th' trail. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," said Brandt curtly, "that's all I want to know."

He turned his horse around and moved toward Alice, who was still talking to the man from the crowd. The fellow was dressed in blue shirt, overalls, and battered leather champs. His gaze was sharp, his face heavily bearded and lined from a lifetime in the sun. Both hair and beard were graying, but he gave the impression of being still in his prime physically.

"Larry," said Alice as he reined in beside her. "This is Will Jackson, I was telling you about."

"Pleased to meet you," said Jackson gruffly. "I reckon any friend of Alice's is a friend of mine."

Both men gripped hands and Jackson grunted approval as they parted.

"I'm going out to the Double T with Jackson," said Alice. "And I want to thank you for all you've done for me today."

"I'll be doing more," said Brandt. "I've got some business to attend to right now, but I'll be out to the Double T later on. Anyway, I'll see you at the funeral."

"Yes," she said slowly. "I guess that'll be tomorrow. I want to get it over with. And then, after that, I've got work to do."

Reluctantly Brandt bid her goodbye and as she and Jackson rode off, stared after them for a long moment, his eyes fixed on Alice with a worried look. He was beginning to realize the difficulty of his position. Somehow, he had to prevent her from rushing headlong into the terrible, hate-ridden vengeance she had been brought up to consummate. It could mean nothing but disaster for her, he knew. A mere girl couldn't hope to cope with the forces lined against her in the valley.

For a moment he felt the urge to spur his horse after her, to stick with her through thick and thin, even though they both lost. But the knowledge that such a course would be worse than hopeless halted him. The only justice of the cow country was gun justice, and he couldn't fight that way against his own father.

He shook his head worriedly. He *must* establish himself in the valley—as a Brandt—in his rightful place, and then work toward the mysterious goal his mother, intentionally or not, had set for him on her dying bed. That would be the only way to right the great wrong that had been done to Alice Coyle.

A curious chill coursed through him as he pictured the look that would be in her luminous brown eyes when she found out who he really was. How help someone who wouldn't take it, would even fight him bitterly? It was going to be the hardest part of the role, bearing her scorn and her inbred hatred of the name he bore. She would never understand.

A flood of resentment flooded over him; resentment toward the man who was the cause of his predicament, the father he didn't even remember, the

father who somehow—though he rebelled at the knowledge with a feeling of depression—had made himself an enemy. There was only one thing to do, and that was to face his father and demand a showdown.

IT WAS already dark when he reined in before the Circle Ten ranchhouse. It was built of rough-hewn logs and plastered with adobe. Light from a flaming oil lamp shone through an open door, and through several of the windows.

Dimly visible in the gloom far behind the house was the high fence of a large corral, indicating the ranch had many punchers. Brandt couldn't see the bunkhouse, but he assumed that it was down at the other end of the corral.

He dismounted and tied his horse to a hitching rail before the house. A tall figure loomed in the doorway and a voice hailed him gruffly.

"Who's there?"

For answer Brandt strode slowly toward the veranda and mounted the steps, halting as he reached the top. The light shone directly in his face.

"Howdy, stranger," said the man in the doorway, peering at him: "What's your business?"

"Mind if I come in?" asked Brandt.

What he could see of the older man's face now was hauntingly familiar. He was bearded, his forehead was high, with thick black hair, slightly gray at the temples, combed straight back. His eyes, in the darkness, were inky black, sunk deep beneath overhanging brows. There seemed a perpetual frown on his heavy features.

"By God!" said the big man suddenly.

He stepped back slowly with an incredulous expression as Brandt advanced into the light. He shook his head a bit, as though he were seeing things.

Brandt halted, gazing at him silently, unmoving.

"Nancy's face," muttered the big man, passing a hand before his eyes. "It can't be!" He advanced suddenly, conviction writing itself on his features, and placed his two hands on Brandt's shoulders.

"Son," he uttered hoarsely. "Where's your mother?"

"Dead," said Brandt slowly, momentarily taken aback by the man's evident emotion, but then the mental picture of a sobbing girl bending over a prone, white-haired form steeled him and he went on. "She died three weeks ago."

For an instant the older man stood silently and Brandt thought he detected relaxing tension, even relief, in his bearing. Then he spoke and his words were not of his dead wife, but of him.

"Twenty years I searched for you, Lawrence. I spent money like water, but there never was a trace. And now, you've come back by yourself! I knew some day you'd do it."

"*She* sent me back," interrupted Brandt significantly, still in the same slow, determined tones, "to claim my rightful place."

The elder Brandt stiffened, and Brandt felt his fingers tighten on his shoulders.

"Your rightful place?" His tones were gruff and uneasy, then suddenly they became louder with what seemed real cordiality, but with a strangely forced manner. "Welcome home, son!" he said. "Your rightful place is bigger'n you think. It's th' whole valley now. I own most of it, and rule the rest, an' now that you're back, we'll run it together. I've been needin' some help I could trust for a long time. You kin take over the Box B spread pronto. It's the second biggest spread in the val-

ley . . ."

"Not the Box B," interposed Brandt again. "I want only what is mine."

The older man's eyes narrowed a bit and he dropped his hands from Brandt's shoulders. Stepping back he regarded him with a puzzled frown.

"It's all yours, the whole valley, son, when I die. Maybe your mother didn't know it, but things have changed since she . . . left."

Brandt met his gaze levelly. "The Bar Forty is all I'll take."

"But why?" protested the elder Brandt. "That little hog-wallow of a ranch ain't fitting for a son of mine."

"Because it's all that *rightfully* belongs to me," Brandt placed emphasis on the words ". . . or *you.*"

"I asked you *why!*" Harland Brandt was suddenly grim and hard.

"I'm not sure myself," Brandt said slowly, "but from what I've learned since I hit the valley, I can guess. Mother left for some reason she thought fit to keep from me. Maybe she was ashamed of her name. But I'm not. At least, I won't be after I get through. I'll make the name Brandt honest if it takes a lifetime!"

"SO THAT'S it, eh?" said the older man slowly, his face reddenning. He seemed to control himself with difficulty. "So you think I ain't honest, eh? Your mother was a fool! She's filled you up with a lot of trash. You'll have to learn that th' law of th' West ain't no roses and kisses. It's hot lead. What I got now is mine, and *yours,* and plumb legal, too. I fought for it, against men that wasn't no better'n me. I ain't aimin' to listen to no damn fool talk, even from . . ." he hesitated, " . . . even from my son, an' you'd best make up your mind to that!"

Brandt ignored the reference to his mother, but it rankled in his breast.

"I killed a man named Smoke Larson today," he said bluntly. "He tried to kill me."

The elder Brandt whitened and Brandt saw that his shot had found home.

"Tried to kill *you!* What for?"

"You wouldn't know why he'd try to kill *anybody,* would you?" Brandt's voice was cutting.

For answer Harland Brandt walked slowly over to the table in the center of the room and sat down on a chair. He placed his knotted fists on the table and looked at Brandt with a peculiar stare The oil lamp flamed smokily and guttered a bit as a draft of air hit it. Brandt remained standing beside the doorway, his arms hanging limply at his sides. His eyes roved past his father to a side window and widened abruptly.

He stiffened, crouched, and with flashing speed went for his gun. It flicked out, leveled, and roared deafeningly in the small room. There was the tinkle of crashing glass. The roar of a second shot came from the window. Screaming wildly, a slug tore across the room, to bury itself in the adobe wall opposite the window.

Brandt remained crouched against the wall beside the door. His father plunged headlong to the floor and dragged his big body out of range. His face was white.

Outside, the sound of running feet, quick and light, came to their ears. Then the pound of hoofs down the trail.

"The danged murderer!" howled the elder Brandt, scrambling to his feet. "I'll get th' blasted coyote!"

He began a rush from the room, but Brandt grasped his arm and halted him. "It won't do any good," he said quietly. "He's got a head start. You'll never catch him in the dark."

Breathing heavily, the angry man

glared at him a moment, then turned back, brushing off his clothes.

"I reckon that'll prove to you I'm just as much in th' right as th' next feller," he pointed out triumphantly. "It's always been that way. An' you'll find it out before you're here long. This ain't no kid's game, this cattle raisin'." He paused a moment, then continued.

"I want to apologize for what I said before, Lawrence. I spoke kinda hasty-like. You can have th' Bar Forty if you want it. But I want you to think it over. I kinda savvy you'll change your mind about me."

He paused and looked peculiarly at Brandt, who stood, brows knit in a worried frown, his gun still dangling in his hand.

"You ain't listening," he accused.

He advanced suddenly an took Brant's gun from his hand and stared at it.

"Where'd you get this six-gun?" he asked, with what seemed forced casualness.

Brandt snapped from his reverie, looking at the older man keenly. "Do you recognize it?"

"No, but it ain't yours. These ain't your initials. Whose are they?"

Brandt shrugged. "I don't know. Mother gave it to me when she died, and I guess it's as good as any."

It seemed to him that Harland Brandt bore an air of relief as he returned the glistening weapon to him, and he knew that he had lied about recognizing it. He was convinced that his father knew the real meaning of those letters, and further, didn't want him to know.

"I guess I'll put up my horse, and then go to bed," he said suddenly, breaking an awkward silence. "I'm not used to riding all day."

The older man slapped him on the shoulder. "Sure, son, I'll take care of th' hoss. Just sashay on upstairs an' take th' front bedroom. It's th' one you slept in when you was a baby."

With a final slap, he turned and clumped out of the house and down the veranda steps.

Brandt stared after him a moment, then turned and went slowly up to the second floor, his knees suddenly weak and trembling.

"I nearly hit her," he whispered shakenly, picturing once more in his mind the white face of Alice Coyle outlined behind the glass of the window, hate blazing in her soft brown eyes. "But I had to do it to keep her from killing Dad. *I had to do it!*"

CHAPTER III

Dirty Work for Tonight

HARLAND BRANDT reined in his horse and pointed down the rocky trail.

"Well, son, there it is," he said slowly. "That's the Bar Forty."

Brandt surveyed the tiny group of buildings spread out below him in silence. There was a ranch house, which he could see was rundown even from a distance, a bunkhouse also in need of repairs, several other ramshackle buildings of cracked adobe, and a large corral, significantly speaking of a past day when the ranch had not been so dilapidated. Beyond was a sparsely grassed range stretching toward the opposite valley wall. Running through the middle of it was the river, and here luxuriant green gave mute token of what could be done with the contrasting brown on each side of the river away from the banks.

Brandt sensed the older man eyeing him.

"You'll have to admit it isn't much, son," Harland Brandt said.

Brandt nodded. "It isn't much to look at now, but a little work and irrigation would have put the spread back on its feet. Why did you let it run down like this?"

For an instant Brandt saw an angry flicker in his father's eyes. It was almost as if his words had stirred up a raw sore in the older man's mind. But the flicker vanished and Harland Brandt looked away, shrugging.

"I've had pretty much work on my hands, son. It hasn't been easy to shape up the valley like I wanted it."

Again Brandt caught a trace of bitterness in the other man's tone. Suddenly his father was looking at him again.

"Why don't you forget this foolish notion about the Bar Forty and take over the Box B like I suggested? That spread can't be beat, 'cept by the Circle Ten."

Brandt shifted in his saddle and looked down at the decrepit ranch below him. He was sorely tempted to take up the offer. But two things rose like a barrier in his mind. He saw his mother again, dying, and telling him to take only what was rightfully his—the Bar Forty, and he was puzzled by the fact that his father, for some mysterious reason had allowed his mother's ranch to go to seed, when it could so easily have been one of the finest ranches in the valley.

"I'll take the Bar Forty, dad," Brandt said with a tone of finality, and giving emphasis to his words, he rowelled his horse forward down the trail.

A group of punchers were gathered around the bunkhouse as they came to a halt in a cloud of swirling dust. They came erect as they saw Harland Brandt. Larry recognized them as the riders who had received him sullenly in town the day before; the pals of the dead Smoke Larson. One of them detached himself from the group and advanced, a scowl on his lean, saturnine features. He wore a drooping mustache and his lips were curled sardonically beneath it. His fingers were curled about his gun butt.

"I don't get the drift," he said coldly, addressing the elder Brandt, "what the hell is this coyote doin' here?"

Harland Brandt stiffened in his saddle. His eyes shot sparks down at the man. "Jeff Smoll," he jerked out, "this here coyote as you call him happens to be my son!"

SMOLL'S jaw dropped open, revealing a set of tobacco stained teeth. "Yore son!" he gasped. "Why this . . . hombre is the cutter that killed Smoke Larson!"

"Smoke Larson made a mistake," Harland Brandt said ominously.

"A mistake? Why, he—"

"I said Larson made a mistake!" repeated the range boss, and Brandt caught the note of cold warning in his voice.

Smoll apparently did too. He stared in quick surprise at the elder Brandt and then suddenly switched his gaze over on Larry.

"All right," he said coldly, "I reckon yore safe now, bein' as you're Brandt's son. But I ain't forgettin' what you did to Smoke . . ."

Smoll abruptly turned his back on Brandt. He walked up beside the range boss's horse.

"I'd like tuh speak tuh yuh alone, chief," he said, turning his heel and starting toward the corral.

Harland Brandt hesitated a moment, then addressed the others.

"Boys, from now on you'll take your orders from my son. He'll take Jeff Smoll's place on the Bar Forty. Is that clear?"

A few of the punchers nodded slightly and the rest remained silent. Brandt

couldn't help but notice the air of tension that hung over them, as if they wanted to say something, but didn't dare.

Harland Brandt seemed to notice it too. He scowled at them, repeated what he had just said, then whirled his horse in the dust and headed for the corral where Brandt could see Smoll already waiting.

Brandt watched him go, then turned to the waiting men.

"This is Thursday," he said, "and I won't decide yet what I want done for a couple of days. So you can have the rest of the week off, with pay. But I'll expect every man to be here on the ranch Monday morning. I guess that's all, boys."

If he expected any grins or signs of friendship from the announcement, he was mistaken. The faces that looked up at him were sullen and distrustful.

He looked over at the corral and saw his father dismounted and leaning against one of the corral posts, talking to Jeff Smoll. It suddenly struck him that the reason for all the secrecy and tension that charged the air, was because of his presence. For an instant he felt that the mere fact that he was Harland Brandt's son was the only reason he was still alive at this moment, and that it might be the only reason in the near future.

He turned his horse and spurred slowly toward the ranch house. As he approached he caught sight of an aged face peering fleetingly from one of the front windows. It vanished as he dismounted and ascended the steps.

FROWNING, Brandt entered the house. The front rooms were filthy, with frayed bits of carpet covering the floor, a few pieces of old stuffed furniture with the back and cushions torn so that blobs of stuffing stuck out, dirtied and gray, and in the living room, in one corner next to a window, a faded beaten upright piano. Everywhere else he looked he saw dirt and cobwebs and cigarette butts. The piano alone stood out as the single respectable piece of furniture in sight. Brandt felt a twinge of memory as he thought of his mother and wondered if in years long past she had sat at that same piano and played . . .

He strode into the rear of the house, through a door at the end of a long hall, and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. The rooms in the rear were as immaculately clean as the ones in front were dirty. He shoved open the kitchen door.

Somebody was standing in the middle of the kitchen, facing him, and staring through black slanted eyes. A leather-faced Chinese cook was busily polishing a huge skillet with a towel.

The rotary motion of the Chinaman's hand slowed. The skillet remained clutched in his fingers.

"Hello," said Brandt. "Was it you I saw peering out the front window a few minutes ago?"

"Yes, Missy Nancy's boy," the cook said solemnly. "Wait velly long time fo' you to come home."

Brandt stared at the old Chinese cook, vague memories tugging at the roots of his mind. There was something hauntingly familiar, hauntingly kind and friendly in those deep-set, imperturbable eyes. And then all at once there was a gladness in them that was not entirely masked by the oriental inscrutability.

"Billy!" Brandt said wonderingly. "Billy! I remember you! You used to give me fresh bread and jam on the sly when Mother wasn't looking. She always said too much sweets would be bad for me . . ."

The grin on the Chinaman's face was

frank and open now.

"Lally John!" he exclaimed, using Brandt's middle name. "Lally John come home! Billy Wong so glad you come home. Maybe now thlings be diffient . . ." His voice trailed away. His towel resumed its rotary motion on the skillet, but his lips were tight. Only his eyes regarded Brandt with gleaming interest tempered by a sudden flickering doubt.

Brandt nodded. "Yes, Billy," he said in low tones, "maybe they will be different. From what I've seen since I've been back there's a lot of changes needed in the valley."

"Be plenty shooting happen if you tly change them, Lally John," said Billy Wong morosely. His gaze roved down to the holster and gun strapped on Brandt's hip. For a long moment he stared, then lifted his eyes back to meet Brandt's gaze.

Brandt hadn't missed the long stare of the old Chinese cook at his holster. Frowning, he pulled the gun out and thrust it butt foremost at Billy Wong.

"Ever see it before, Billy?"

"Old gun, velly nice . . ." Wong agreed. Then: "But not see any time. You shoot stlaight—don't fool alound!"

Brandt sighed, shoved the gun back in its holster.

"Thanks for the advice, Billy," he said. "But I don't need it. Maybe you've already heard what happened to Smoke Larson?"

The Chinese cook's face bobbed up and down. "Have heard. Velly bad business. You watch out, Lally John, velly dangelous."

BRANDT strode forward and leaned against the kitchen table, his eyes close to Wong.

"Billy, maybe you can help me find out some of the things I want to know. Just who was Curtis Coyle, and why did my father have him killed—and his wife years back?"

Wong's mouth started to open in reply, then, just as suddenly, snapped shut. The eagerness and friendliness that Brandt had seen on his face abruptly vanished. It was just as if an ancient wall of stone had formed around the old cook's features.

Brandt frowned in annoyance, and was about to repeat the questions when he noticed that Wong wasn't looking at him. He was looking over his shoulder . . .

Brandt swung around to find his father leaning against the open kitchen door. There was a sullen grimace on the older man's face and his right hand was resting suggestively against the holster at his hip.

Brandt felt a wave of guilt crawling through him. He wondered just how much his father had heard. He understood now the sudden stoniness of the Chinaman.

"Just dropped in to say I was leaving," the elder Brandt said slowly.

Brandt nodded. "I was just talking to Billy . . . going over old times."

"So I see," Harland Brandt said, and Brandt couldn't help but notice the hint of sarcasm in his father's voice. "I'll be leaving now. I'm taking Jeff Smoll with me—you won't be needing him any more. If there's anything I can do for you, just ask. And I'm still hoping you'll change your mind about the Box B."

Brandt followed his father through the house to the front door. "Thanks, Dad, I'll remember." He watched the older man walk down the steps toward his horse. Jeff Smoll was holding the reins from his own saddle. There was a smirk of contempt on the ranch foreman's face that Brandt didn't miss. He watched his father mount and ride off with Jeff Smoll behind him.

"Velly dangelous, Lally John, velly dangelous."

Brandt wheeled around to find Billy Wong standing in the front hall, the skillet still held in his long, bony fingers. His wrinkled oriental features were set in a sober stare and he was shaking his head slowly.

Brandt nodded. "You're right, Billy, I nearly made a slip that time. I wonder if he heard what we were talking about?"

Wong shook his head harder. "Me not talking about Halland Blandt. That Smoll man, he dangelous, you watch out."

Brandt shrugged. "Any time Jeff Smoll wants to see me, I'll be around."

BILLY WONG sighed, and when he spoke, Brandt caught the note of urgent warning in his voice.

"Velly bad business in valley, Lally John, velly bad. Billy Wong tell you watch out. Velly bad fo' Missy Coyle too . . ."

Brandt snapped erect at that. He had forgotten all about Alice and the funeral. He had promised that he would come, and it was even more urgent now that he did go. He must try and persuade her to leave the valley. It was going to be tough enough trying to straighten things out with his father and men like Jeff Smoll, without a revenge-minded girl making things worse.

He turned to Wong. "Billy, I'm going in to Miraldo for the Coyle funeral. I'll be back about supper time. I've given the men the rest of the week off so you can take it easy."

The Chinaman nodded. "Me flix up house while you away. Have nice supper leady."

Brandt smiled and swung out the front door to where he had left his horse. He noted that the ranch hands had already gone. This fact, while not suspicious in itself since he had given the men leave, made him wonder. They had lost no time in leaving the ranch. He remembered again the smirk on Jeff Smoll's face, and Brandt had an uneasy feeling that up until now everything he had done was playing right into his father's and Jeff Smoll's hands.

BRANDT worked his horse slowly along the dusty trail that led to Miraldo. He was high on the East rim of the valley again, threading his way through boulder strewn trailways that five or six miles ahead, he knew, would slope down to the valley floor, and into Miraldo.

Beyond Miraldo, to the South, would be the Double T spread owned by Will Jackson, where Alice Coyle was staying. Ringing it to the East, West and North were the lands owned by his father, Harland Brandt.

Brandt let his horse ease its way slowly along the trail as he took in the view of the valley between chinks in the boulder strewn slope. His progress was almost soundless as his horse's hooves beat a muffled path along the dusty trail. He had plenty of time to make the funeral yet, and he wanted to think.

So far he had followed his mother's dying wish, in taking over the Bar Forty, the ranch she had said rightfully belonged to him. But what about the future? What was to happen to the other few independent ranchers still left in the valley—like Will Jackson? It was apparent to even a stranger, as Brandt still felt himself to be, that a struggle for domination of the valley was reaching its climax. When it came, which side would he find himself on? Could he forsake his father in a battle against his own blood?

A deep, worried frown was creasing his forehead as his horse started a down grade in the trail that led to the valley

floor. And then suddenly Brandt stiffened in his saddle and brought his mount to a muffled, silent halt.

Ahead on the trail a man had just dismounted from a horse and, back bent almost double, was slinking along the side of the trail toward the crest of a small bluff. His back was to Brandt and he was unaware that he was being watched. He skirted around the side of a rock clump and for the moment was lost to sight.

Brandt sat still for a moment in his saddle as he waited for the man to reappear. But he didn't. Something told Brandt to remain quiet, that what he had seen had not been meant for his eyes.

Cautiously he slipped from his saddle to the ground. He fastened the reins of his horse around a jutting projection of rock along the trail slope, and then hustled forward.

His boots made scarcely a sound as he approached the other man's horse. The animal moved sideways the length of its tethered reins as Brandt approached. There was still no sign of the other man.

Something on the saddle caught in the sunlight and reflected in Brandt's eyes. It was the metal glistening emblem of a large Double T that was set in the saddle. Brandt drew in his breath sharply at that. What was one of Will Jackson's riders doing up here on the trail? Or was it Will Jackson himself?

BRANDT skirted the boulder the man had disappeared behind. He kept to the left of the trail and slipped up behind a rocky projection on the east slope. Confident now that he was hidden from view from anyone on the trail or the other side, Brandt hurried swiftly forward.

He had gone less than fifty yards when a low mumble of voices reached his ears. He crouched down behind the protecting rock cluster and then slowly edged forward. He noted that he was practically on the crest of the bluff he had noticed before. He removed his hat and edged his head forward toward a V shaped chink in the rock.

He saw the other man first. The fellow was some thirty yards off to Brandt's right, and slightly forward, on the other side of the trail. He was shinnied between two boulders with his head sticking over the top of one of them, peering straight ahead.

Brandt followed his gaze.

The bluff spread out onto a grassy clearing of some fifty yards in diameter. At its crest, close enough for Brandt to hear their voices, two men were hunkered down close to the ground, eyes peering out across the valley. He didn't need their voices to recognize them.

It was Harland Brandt and Jeff Smoll.

Sheer surprise rooted Brandt to the spot. For the moment he forgot about the other eavesdropper on the opposite side of the trail. Words floated up to him.

"They'll run them through past Crag Point and then on down the West slope." It was Harland Brandt talking.

"Yeh, I'll have the boys waitin' there. It'll be a pleasure!" That was Jeff Smoll, Brandt knew.

"Listen, Jeff, this has got to be handled right. I won't have any slipups. After tonight I expect things to be run my way. Remember that."

Brandt heard Jeff Smoll laugh. "After tonight, chief, there ain't gonna be anybody left to stand in yore way!"

The voices lowered then as both men focused their attention on the valley spread out below them. From his protecting position behind the rock, Brandt

watched them with a puzzled frown. It was apparent from what his father had said that something big was being planned. But against who? And what was it? He suddenly remembered the rider from the Double T, eavesdropping across the trail, much as he was. What was he doing here?

A sudden sound swung Brandt's head around. It was the dry clink of a spur against rock. Even as he turned his head, following the sound, Brandt saw the Double T man rising from his concealed place on the opposite side of the trail. Afternoon sunlight glinted on the six-gun he held.

ALMOST at the same time there was a warning shout from Jeff Smoll on the knoll. Things happened fast.

There was a spurt of flame as Smoll drew and fired in almost the same instant. There was an answering roar from the Double T rider. Dirt kicked up at Jeff Smoll's foot.

But the Double T man wasn't so lucky. Brandt watched him suddenly stagger against the side of the boulder he had been crouched behind, and his knees were sagging like pieces of rubber.

"Yuh dirty, slinkin' coyote!" Brandt heard Jeff Smoll snarl.

Then he heard his father. "Don't waste time, you fool! He heard everything we said!"

Frozen to the spot by some inner sense, Brandt watched as Smoll came forward to finish the job on the wounded man. The eavesdropper was on his knees now, trying to lift his gun hand and fire. Brandt knew he would never have a chance.

Almost before he knew what he was doing, Brandt snaked his own six-gun from its holster. He was amazed once again at the speed with which he drew, and almost instinctively aimed.

Only his gun hand and half of his body protruded around the rock when his gun blasted. He saw Jeff Smoll's gun whip from his hand and heard the stinging buzz of the riccochet as his own bullet whirred from the gun metal. He saw the slack look of astonishment that spread over Smoll's features, and then the sudden fear. Brandt grimly knew that his bullet could just as well have found Smoll's heart.

From beyond the point where Jeff Smoll stood, Brandt heard his father shout: "It's a trap! Let's get out of here!"

Harland Brandt's words were unnecessary. Jeff Smoll had already spun around and dove for a protecting clump of boulders bordering the grassy part of the knoll. There was plenty of time for another shot. Brandt knew it as he followed Smoll's retreating form with his gun. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to send another bullet smashing into the killer's body. But Brandt didn't fire.

Moments later he heard the thunder of the two men's horses as they beat a hurried retreat down the trail. Brandt felt his heart pounding and a sudden chill swept through him. What would he have done if it had been his father instead of Jeff Smoll? Was this the heritage he had returned to claim?

A moan of pain drifted across the trail.

BRANDT swore softly to himself and holstered his gun. As he hurried across the trail toward the wounded man he couldn't help thinking about the ease with which he had shot Jeff Smoll's gun from his hand. With the same ease and accuracy that he had killed Smoke Larson.

He reached the opposite side where the Double T rider was slumped down on the ground. A red well of blood

was already soaking into the dry dirt of the trail. Brandt knelt beside the man and turned him over slowly.

"Easy, fellow, I'm a friend; you've got nothing to worry about."

The wounded man turned pain filled eyes up at Brandt. Recognition filled them as he gazed at Larry's lean, tanned features. "You're . . . John Lawrence . . . Saw you in town yesterday . . ."

Brandt nodded grimly. "You're in bad shape, fellow. I'm going to have to take you back to the Bar Forty with me. Then I'll get in touch with Will Jackson."

The wounded man gasped painfully. "The Bar Forty . . . That's one of Harland Brandt's spreads! . . . I'll go to boothill first . . ."

Brandt already had his arms under the man's shoulders. He stiffened at the words and suddenly realized the impossible situation he was getting himself into. How could he explain now that he was in reality Harland Brandt's son? And even though he had saved this puncher's life, who would believe it now?

Brandt tried to find words to say and then felt the man go limp against him. He laid him back on the ground and felt for his heart. His hand grew wet and sticky, but there was a beat.

Tense-lipped and thoughtful, Brandt rose and hurried for the two horses. His own, and the Double T rider's.

BILLY WONG came hurrying out on the front porch, his oriental features slack with surprise, as Brandt jumped down from his horse and lifted the Double T rider from his.

"Lally John! What happen—you get in tlouble?"

Brandt grunted under the weight of the wounded man. "Get some hot water and cloth for bandages. Hurry!"

Brandt carried the unconscious man up the steps and onto the porch. Billy Wong backed hurriedly, wringing his hands. He opened the front door for Brandt and then scurried down the hall toward the kitchen.

Brandt laid his burden on a decrepit couch in the living room and knelt beside the man, tearing open his shirt. The wound, he saw, fortunately was above the heart and had struck only a glancing blow across the man's ribs. There was a deep furrow of raw, bleeding flesh, but Brandt could tell at a glance that it wasn't fatal.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the Chinese cook came bobbing into the room, a fold of white sheet draped across one arm, and carrying a basin of steaming water.

Brandt got to his feet. "Billy, do you think you can take care of him? It's a pretty deep flesh wound."

Wong nodded, but his old face was still covered with a shocked surprise and alarm. "Can do, Lally John. Maybe you tell Billy what happen? Maybe you in tlouble?"

Brandt shook his head. There was no use telling the old Chinese that his father and Jeff Smoll were responsible. "I haven't got time now, Billy. Just see that he's comfortable, and keep him quiet. I'm going in to town for the Coyle funeral. This man is one of Will Jackson's riders. I'll have him send some one out."

Brandt could see the fear that suddenly rose in Billy Wong's eyes. "This velly bad, Lally John. This mean big fight—velly bad . . ."

Brandt sighed. He could well understand what Wong meant, but there was no turning back now. He started walking toward the door.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Billy. Do what you can for him while I'm gone."

He left the Chinaman standing beside the wounded Double T rider, and Billy Wong looked very sad.

WHEN Brandt rode into Miraldo it was late afternoon. He rode his horse down the middle of its dusty street, and even before he reached the low one-story shack that served as furniture store and funeral parlor, he could see he was too late.

The street itself was almost deserted. It was too early yet for the ranch hands to be coming in, and this struck him immediately. The few horses that were tethered at the main saloon didn't have the Bar Forty stamp on their saddles. Where then were his punchers?

A cold feeling swept through Brandt. He remembered, in a flash, the look of contempt Jeff Smoll had given him when he rode off from the Bar Forty with his father. He also remembered that the punchers had not seemed even pleased about his giving them the rest of the week off. That wasn't natural. A rannie's first impulse should have been to head for town and the nearest saloon. But there wasn't a Bar Forty horse in sight. Brandt had the feeling again, that every move he made played right into his father's and Jeff Smoll's hands.

He looped the reins of his horse over the hitching post of the funeral parlor and stepped up on the board walk. He was about to approach the dirty glass door when he caught sight of someone lounging against the wall of the saloon next door. The man looked strangely familiar, with his brown hair slightly gray at the temples, and still holding a faint curl. His right arm was hung loosely at his side, and his holster was slung from his left leg.

The man was staring at him with fixed eyes, and then Brandt suddenly remembered him. It was the man called Pete Garland, the one who had stood up to the sheriff, Warnett, when the law officer had tried to pin a murder rap on Brandt for killing Smoke Larson.

Garland left his place at the wall of the saloon and sauntered over.

"Reckon yore lookin' for the Coyle funeral."

Brandt nodded. "Looks like I'm a little late."

Garland pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket with his left hand, inserted it between his lips, drew a match from his pants pocket, still using his left hand, and struck it.

"Yep. Was held early this mornin'. Miss Coyle was kinda lookin' for you. Seemed to think you'd show up."

Brandt frowned. "That was kind of quick work, wasn't it?"

Garland shrugged. "Mebbe so. But Will Jackson had some of his boys in with him for the funeral, and I reckon he had to get back for the drive."

Brandt felt his throat suddenly tighten. "Drive? What drive?"

"The drive Will Jackson is makin' with his herd from Crag Point. Bringin' 'em down tomorrow mornin', I hear."

BRANDT felt his blood run cold. His mind whirled as he suddenly saw his father and Jeff Smoll on the knoll overlooking Miraldo, and talking about Crag Point. He heard Jeff Smoll reassuring his father that he would have the boys ready and that after tonight there wouldn't be anyone left to stand in their way.

He saw it all, the whole filthy plot, unravelled suddenly before his eyes, and it left him cold. With Will Jackson financially ruined, his herd gone, there would be nobody strong enough to oppose the Brandt law in the valley.

"What's wrong, son, you look kinda pale!"

Brandt stared wildly at Garland, his

mind racing.

"Pete," he said, conscious that his voice sounded cracked and strained, "the Double T spread is just a few miles to the South, isn't it?"

Garland nodded slowly, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Brandt. "That's right, son. You thinkin' of goin' out there?"

Brandt had started to turn, but paused. "You stood up for me yesterday, and I didn't get a chance to thank you. I take it you're on the side of Will Jackson?"

Garland blew ash from his cigarette. "If you mean whether I'm against Harland Brandt, I reckon so. Why?"

Brandt pointed to Garland's six-shooter. "I think maybe Jackson might be able to use you—tonight. You might ride out there."

He left it at that and spun toward his horse. He was in the saddle and rowelling the horse down the street before Garland had a chance to say anything.

There was only one thing on Larry Brandt's mind. He knew he had to get out to the Double T and warn Jackson of the impending trouble. He rode out into the flaming sunset of the valley, conscious that even nature was spilling blood in a warm wave across the surrounding land . . .

CHAPTER IV

Stampede

THE valley night was soft and cool around Larry Brandt as he rode into the ranch yard of the Double T. Even in the thickening dusk of night he could tell that here was a ranch well kept, here was something worth fighting for, even at overwhelming odds, such as Jackson was facing in the duel for supremacy of Paradise valley. He had a strange feeling inside him that this was where he belonged. Even if it meant fighting against, and betraying his own father.

His horse made the only sound in the evening air as he rode up to the ranch house. Inside, Brandt could see light coming from the living room, and it was the only light visible. Not even in the bunkhouse off to the left was there any sign of life.

Brandt dismounted and hurried up the steps, his boots thumping noisily. As he reached the top step the front door swung suddenly open and light flooded out on the porch.

"Who's out there?"

It was a voice Brandt knew. It was filled with tense warning.

"It's John Lawrence, Alice," Brandt replied, advancing.

Alice Coyle stepped into the doorway, her rich brown hair haloed in the light. She held a six-gun in a steady hand.

"You won't need that," Brandt told her.

She stared at him as he came into the light of the hallway. Then slowly she holstered her gun.

"Oh. It's you. What do you want?"

Brandt couldn't help but notice the indifference in her voice. And he couldn't very well blame her for what she was thinking. He realized that he had promised to attend her father's funeral, but he also knew that that was a minor item right then.

"Where's Will Jackson? I've got to see him," Brandt said.

The girl stepped aside and Brandt entered the house. She continued to stare at him.

"Will isn't here. What do you want to see him for?"

Brandt stiffened at her words and then began cursing himself for a fool. Of course Jackson wouldn't be at the ranch! He should have thought of that

—Jackson would be with his men at Crag Point . . .

"There's nobody here but me," Alice said. "Will and the boys are at Crag Point for the night. They'll be moving cattle down the valley tomorrow morning. I—" She broke off and looked at him queerly. "You look kind of pale—is anything wrong?"

Brandt met her gaze. "There's plenty wrong. I just rode in from Miraldo. I found out that Harland Brandt plans a raid tonight on Jackson's herd."

The girl stepped back as if she had received a blow in the face. "What did you say?" she cried out. Then her mouth became tight. "If this is some kind of a joke! . . ."

"I rode out here to tell Jackson that for a good laugh," Brandt replied heatedly. "Look, I haven't got time to argue now. I've got to get to Jackson before it's too late."

Brandt turned to go.

"Just a minute!" Alice Coyle said sharply. "I'm going along."

Brandt wheeled. "You?" He shook his head. "Don't be silly—there's going to be trouble . . . and shooting."

Her eyes flashed at him. "You're damn right there's going to be shooting! I've got a personal score to settle with the Brandts and I can shoot as fast and straight as any man!"

Brandt winced inwardly under her words, but for some reason, felt a glow of warmth sweep through him. She was every inch a woman, and yet there was fearlessness and a grim determination about her that set her above any woman Brandt had ever known.

She grabbed her hat from a table in the hall and went through the door. "Besides," she said, "I know the way to Crag Point and you're a stranger here."

Brandt didn't say anything to that. He couldn't think of anything. Moments later he rode after her out of the ranch yard, spurring his horse viciously to keep up.

THE moon was peeping over the mountains to the East as Brandt and the girl urged their tired mounts up the last rocky slope to the summit. In the moonlight, froth on the horses' muzzles stood out like rings of spun silver. The night air was silent and motionless, tense and expectful.

Brandt brought his horse to a pawing halt and the girl reined in beside him. Together they stared out over the panorama before them.

Crag Point was the culminating peak of a long grassy plain. Running down from the mountains beyond, and stretching like a ribbon of silver through the plain was the course of a mountain stream. The plain itself swept up to the Point and into a narrow pass that led to the valley floor and down to Miraldo. Through this pass, Brandt knew, Jackson's cattle had to pass. There was only one other way down. That was over Crag Point itself—a jagged drop nearly a thousand feet of rock and boulder.

The girl spoke quietly beside him, "Everything seems to be all right."

Brandt didn't reply. His eyes swept down on the plain, where, in the rising moonlight he made out a dark swaying mass. Soft sounds drifted up to them, the intermittent lowing and snorting of massed cattle. Will Jackson's herd.

"Look!" Alice Coyle pointed. "There's the campfire and the chuck wagon."

Brandt followed her gesture and nodded grimly. Yes, there was the campfire, a small glow of light far below them, and beside it, the unmistakable outline of a camp wagon. Around the wagon would be Will Jackson and his men, bedding down for the night. And up on the point . . .

"Let's get down there fast, John."

Alice Coyle spoke nervously beside him.

But Brandt wasn't listening to her just then. His attention had focused on the narrow pass leading through Crag Point. He had seen something.

Wraithlike shadows were moving down in the pass. Shadows that could mean only one thing. Harland Brandt and his men were gathering down there, poised ready to strike. And Will Jackson . . .

Brandt grabbed the girl's arm as she started to ride around him. "Hold it! Look down at the pass—we're too late!"

The girl followed his gaze and a soft cry welled in her thoat. "John! It *is* them! What can we do?"

BRANDT thought desperately. To reach Will Jackson and his men now before his father's band struck, was out of the question. Within short minutes it would be too late to do anything. But until then . . .

"Get your gun ready, Alice," Brandt said suddenly.

"What are you going to do?"

Brandt drew his own six-shooter. "You said you could fire as fast and straight as any man. Well you're going to get a chance now. Our only chance to warn Jackson will be to start firing at Harland Brandt's men. If we're lucky we can delay them long enough for Jackson to organize."

He could hear the girl draw in her breath sharply. "I'm ready," she said. "And I hope to God I get Harland Brandt myself!"

Brandt didn't reply. There was a cold stone closing around his heart as his finger tightened on the trigger of his gun. Then there was a thunderous blast on the night air as his six-gun exploded. Almost immediately there was another blast beside Brandt as the girl fired.

Brandt felt his gun hand buck sharply as he fired shot after shot down toward the hulking shadows in the pass. He knew there wasn't much chance of accuracy at the distance, but he wasn't hoping for that much luck.

What Brandt had been praying for began to happen down in the pass. Hoarse shouts of voices lifted up to the slope they were firing from, and there was a sudden milling of panic as the Brandt men in the pass dove for cover.

"John!" Alice Coyle called sharply over the blast of her six-gun. "Look! Jackson and the boys are coming!"

Brandt flashed a quick glance down at the plain beneath them. In the moonlight he made out a band of horsemen rushing from the direction of the chuck wagon. The muffled pounding of hoof beats drifted up.

Something whanged sharply beside Brandt's head. He felt a hot breeze fan his cheek and then pieces of rock chipped in a showering ricochet.

"Get back!" Brandt shouted at the girl. "That was a Winchester—they've got our range!"

Savagely, Brandt rowelled his horse sideways behind the protecting flank of a jutting boulder. The girl joined him. Brandt started reloading.

"We've done all we can from up here. I'm going to ride down and try and catch them from the rear. Stay here and keep pumping lead down to draw their fire."

The girl spoke sharply. "This is more my fight than yours!"

Brandt swung on her. "Don't be a fool! There's nothing but death waiting down there! I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you . . ."

He heard the girl draw in her breath sharply, and Brandt suddenly realized he had said something he hadn't expected to say. The girl moved her horse beside him, and Brandt felt her fingers close on his arm.

"All right, John, I'll do as you say.

But be careful . . ."

Brandt felt something warm pulse in his throat. There had been something more than pure physical contact in her touch. Something that didn't need words.

A RISING crescendo of shots split the air as Brandt suddenly wheeled his horse and shot out onto the narrow trail that sloped down toward the pass. Boulders on both sides of the trail screened Brandt from both the plain and the pass. But he could hear increased shooting and the hoarse shouts of men out to kill.

It was slow, laborious work for Brandt as he felt his way along the trail. His thoughts were dull aches as he realized what he was riding in to. He had come to Paradise valley to claim only what was rightfully his—the Bar Forty. The dying words of his mother had made that plain to him. But what she hadn't told him was the truth about his father. Could he stand by while his father rode pillage and murder through the valley and innocent people fell under the guns of his hired killers?

Brandt's thoughts broke off as a new sound thundered across the night. It was the reverberating boom of stampeding cattle. It chilled Brandt's flesh and his lips tightened grimly. Had they been too late?

The trail twisted sharply to the right and Brandt found himself suddenly directly above the pass. What met his eyes made him bring his horse to a pawing halt, and a curse flew from his lips.

Jackson's men had been too late to ward off the attack from Harland Brandt's men in the pass. The Brandt riders had swarmed out onto the plain, straight on the flank of the massed herd, and, firing wildly, had started a stampede that was heading straight for Crag Point!

Brandt ground his teeth in agony as he watched the cruel drama taking place before his eyes. The first mass of cattle had already reached the pass, and were being turned aside by other Brandt riders. The howling, thundering mass of cattle pounded for the Point, reached it, and dove over.

There were sounds then that Brandt had never heard before. The smashing batter of cattle falling to their death in a thousand foot plunge, the painful lowing . . .

In a rage Brandt had never knew before, he whipped out his gun and leapt from his saddle. He was firing into the pass as his feet touched the ground, his left hand fanned the hammer with the speed of an automatic Winchester. Lead spattered the pass and the Brandt killers dove for cover.

EVEN as he paused to reload, Brandt whipped his gaze to the other side of the pass, and Crag Point.

His heart leapt as he saw the Double T riders suddenly break through the stampede and swerve the mad dash of the remainder of the herd. It was Harland Brandt's men who were now caught in a trap. The cattle were rushing down on the pass with the Double T men riding hard on their flank, guns blazing.

From somewhere below him Brandt heard a shout. He leaned over the side of the trail and saw his father waving madly at his men.

Brandt had his gun loaded. He had it pointed straight down into the pass, straight at the man whose name he bore. His finger was white on the trigger and he knew the bullet would run straight to its mark.

He couldn't fire. Sweat rolled down his face and burned his eyes. He couldn't fire.

And then it was too late. The Brandt riders turned tail to a man and stormed

back through the pass. Bright moonlight shimmered down on them as they passed beneath Brandt. Cursing in rage at the thing that had kept him from firing at a proven killer, Brandt now let go with his gun. He saw two men fall in quick succession as his gun blasted.

Then hot lead fanned by his cheek as the last rider swept by below. His face was turned up to Brandt, and in the moonlight he saw Jeff Smoll firing and hurling curses up at him.

Brandt ducked his head as another bullet ricocheted beside him. When he lifted his head to fire back, Smoll was gone, and so were the rest of the Brandt killers.

Brandt scrambled to his feet in time to see the Double T riders outdistance the fore-runners of the remaining cattle and swerve the herd away from the narrow pass and back onto the plain. There was no opportunity for Jackson's men to take out after Brandt, with the cattle still running wildly. And Brandt knew that he could do nothing himself.

Wearily Brandt mounted and started down to help Jackson's men.

HEAVY clouds had scurried down from the mountains to shadow the moon before Brandt finally joined the rest of the Double T riders back to the chuck wagon. The herd, half gone, had been quieted down, and guards had been left on the flanks just in case.

The men were silent as they rode back in the darkness. When they finally reached the rebuilt fire at the chuck wagon, Brandt saw someone else waiting. It was Alice Coyle.

Brandt dismounted and followed Will Jackson up to the fire. Jackson swore.

"The dirty damned killers! They got away with half the herd!"

Alice Coyle's face was pale and drawn in the fire light. Her eyes, however, smoldered with deep fires of hate.

"They'll pay for it! Every one of them will if I have to kill them myself!"

Jackson sighed. "In a way it's my own fault. I shoulda known Brandt would try something like this . . ."

Brandt stepped forward rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure he's through yet, Jackson."

The Double T boss turned swiftly. "What do yuh mean?"

"Just this," Brandt said. "You've got the ranch unprotected and what's to stop Brandt from riding down there and finishing the job?"

Jackson's mouth dropped open in sheer surprise. "By God, he *would* try somethin' like that!" The Double T boss swung around on his men and gave swift orders. Moments later the remaining riders had swept off.

Jackson turned back to Brandt. "I'm in a tough spot, Mister Lawrence. I can't afford to let any more men go back to the ranch, and if Brandt does try anything we'll be outnumbered."

Brandt kicked dust with his boot. "Why not ride into town and have the sheriff put up a posse? You're going to need help."

Alice Coyle came over beside Brandt. Her fingers brushed his arm as she spoke tremulously.

"Warnett is tied in hand and foot with Brandt! Will would never have a chance!"

Jackson swore. "I'd rot in boothill before I'd ask that sidewinder for help.

Brandt hitched his gun belt. "Well, I guess you know you can count me in."

Jackson moved closer to the fire. In the ruddy light his bearded features were stern. "You've done more than was rightly yore share already. I reckon I owe you a lot."

Brandt turned his head away and met the eyes of the girl. They were soft and warm and brown. "You can count me in

on that too, John," she said softly. "You got the man who killed daddy, and joined this fight against Brandt when you didn't have to . . ."

Her voice trailed off as a sudden sound of hoofbeats rose off in the darkness. All three of them strained their eyes into the darkness.

"Who the hell is that?" Jackson muttered, drawing his gun in a single swift motion.

Brandt felt a sudden sense of impending danger, something that he could not account for, but something none the less tangible.

A RIDER grew out of the darkness and brought his horse to a sliding halt. Brandt felt his heart turn cold.

It was the wounded Double T rider he had left back at the Bar Forty under the care of Billy Wong!

The man slid painfully from his saddle and Jackson rushed forward to help him. He was bare from the waist up, with only a criss-crossing bandage running over his chest. On the left side it was caked with dried blood.

"Fred!" Jackson called out. "What the hell's happened to you?"

The Double T man came slowly into the firelight. His face, Brandt saw, was haggard and worn. He looked like a man walking on his last legs. Brandt tried to back up into the shadows but he was too late. The puncher had seen him.

He shot an accusing finger at Brandt and tried to grab the gun out of Will Jackson's hands.

"Yuh dirty, slinkin' coyote! Tried to keep me prisoner with yore chink so's I wouldn't be able to warn the boys! I'll—"

"Fred!" Jackson called out sharply. "What the hell you talkin' about? This is John Lawrence—it was him that tipped us off!"

The puncher made another ineffectual grab at Jackson's gun and laughed harshly.

"John Lawrence! That shore is a hot 'un. Yuh want to know who this slimy sidewinder really is? Ask him!"

Brandt took a deep breath and stepped back into the glare of the fire. He knew the masquerade was over, finally. And suddenly he was glad. It was like a great weight being lifted from his shoulders. He had openly declared himself an enemy of his father, and it was time the truth were known. Besides, after what he had done tonight there couldn't be any doubt as to which side he was on.

"Fred's right," Brandt said evenly. "My name isn't John Lawrence."

Jackson stared from Brandt back to the wounded puncher. "I don't get it. Is this some kind of a joke?"

Brandt looked over at Alice Coyle. She had moved away from him and was standing staring at him with mixed puzzlement and surprise in her eyes. Brandt felt a wave of guilt sweep over him as he looked at her, but he knew there was no backing out now.

"My name is Larry Brandt. I'm Harland Brandt's son."

If he had dropped a bombshell in their midst his words couldn't have produced more consternation. Jackson's mouth dropped open and his eyes were wide and bulging. The girl let out a cry of surprise and then savagely bit her lips.

"That isn't true—it can't be true!" She cried out.

The Double T rider laughed scornfully. "It's true all right! I was scoutin' Brandt and his killer Smoll this afternoon on the East trail. This here coyote musta been trackin' me 'cause when I heard Brandt and Smoll plottin' to raid us tonight they discovered me hidin' on the trail and let go. Brandt and Smoll beat it and left this here

snake to make sure I wouldn't talk.

"I came to in the ranch house of the Bar Forty with a chink sittin' beside me and tellin' me to keep quiet. When I tried to leave he pulled a gun on me and that's when I found out about this Lawrence hombre. The chink told me who he was and tried to load me up with a lot of loco stuff about Brandt ridin' over to tell you I was wounded!"

THE puncher stopped talking and leaned against the side of the chuck wagon, panting. His strength, Brandt saw, was ebbing fast.

Jackson started to come forward slowly. "So it's true, huh? Yuh admit bein' Brandt's son! And all the time we thought yuh was tryin' to help us!

"Yuh made damn shore yuh didn't get here in time to stop the raid!"

Brandt set his jaw grimly. "You know that isn't true! I've been on your side ever since I came back to the valley. I didn't know about my father until I got here. If it hadn't been for me your man, Fred there, would never left that hill alive! I brought him back to my ranch, the Bar Forty, just like he says, and I was on my way to the funeral of Alice's father when I found out in town about your roundup. I knew then what my father was planning to do so I hightailed it to your ranch—and you know the rest."

Alice Coyle was standing with her feet spread wide, her hands on her hips, and her face suddenly cold and hard.

"You a Brandt! I see a lot of things now! You were right on hand when my father was killed! You shot Smoke Larson because you figured it was a way to get on our side! You handled it slick—you even made sure you got to our place too late to stop the raid!

"And if you came over to tell us about Fred—why didn't you?"

Brandt suddenly knew that whatever he said now they wouldn't believe. He was like a man stunned, at the turn of events. He could see that both Jackson and the girl were waiting for a reply, and he noticed that Jackson was fingering his six-shooter.

"I meant to tell you about Fred," Brandt said, "but when I found out about the raid I figured that was more important. Good God—if it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have a cow left tonight!"

Jackson shook his head slowly. "Won't do you any good to lie now, *Brandt!* I reckon I can see why you suggested me sending the boys back to the ranch—your father and his killers are probably waiting right now to come back and finish the job!"

"That's a damn lie!" Brandt said angrily. "I've told you the truth!"

It was Alice Coyle who stepped forward. In the ruddy glare of the fire Brandt could see her eyes, cold and hostile, her features clamped in a rigid stare.

"I swore to kill every Brandt in the valley. I swore it over the body of my daddy—shot dead by a Brandt bullet! You're even worse than a skunk!"

BRANDT stood tense. He shifted his gaze from the girl to Jackson. "I don't blame you for thinking what you are. But you're wrong. If you kill me you'll kill the last friend you have in the valley . . ."

There was nothing but hate in Jackson's eyes. His gun hand came up, covering Brandt. "I've waited a long time for something like this. Maybe some of my boys will rest easier in boothill after tonight."

Alice Coyle stopped him. "This is my affair, Will. I made a vow I'm going to keep."

There was no mistaking the intent in her voice. There was no mistaking the

way she reached for her gun and drew. Brandt knew she would keep her promise.

He could have tried to outdraw her, even in the face of Jackson's gun. But he knew he could never have fired a shot, even if he had. He knew death was closing the books on him.

"Drop those guns—both of you!"

It happened so unexpectedly that both Jackson and the girl froze. Out of nowhere, in the blackness surrounding the fire, a voice suddenly shot out.

"I said drop those guns!"

Jackson swung his eyes about into the darkness at the edge of the chuck wagon. Brandt followed his gaze but could see nothing. A puzzled frown crossed his face. That voice was somehow familiar . . .

"Who's out there?" Jackson demanded angrily.

"That don't make no difference," the voice answered. "I said to drop those guns. I can drop anyone who makes a move—and I'll do it!"

Alice Coyle glared at Brandt. "Try and talk your way out of this one! You made sure you had one of your men close by in case anything happened!"

Brandt remained silent and watched as both Jackson and the girl dropped their guns to the ground. Over against the wagon, Fred, the wounded puncher, was glaring through pain-filled eyes.

"All right, Larry, beat it," the voice said.

Brandt stood indecisively. If he left now there would be no doubt in Jackson's and the girl's mind as to his guilt. But if he remained . . .

"Go on, Larry, I caint stand out here all night."

Brandt abruptly wheeled and headed for his horse. When he left the glare of the fire he made out the figure of a man standing on the opposite side of the blaze, a six-gun held in his hand. But that was all he could see.

"I don't know who you are," Brandt called out to him, "but I appreciate what you're trying to do. If you're one of my father's men I don't think I want your help."

The voice came back quickly. "I'm not one of Brandt's men. If you was like Harland Brandt I wouldn't be here. Sashay out o' here while you've got a chance."

Brandt rose into his saddle and passed a fleeting glimpse at Jackson and the girl. They were standing, tight-lipped, in the fire's glare. As he rowelled his horse into the night he heard Jackson shout after him.

"Don't think your trick's going to work, Brandt! You won't get the rest of my cattle! I'll have my men back here and I'll be lookin' for you—with a forty-five!"

It was the last thing Brandt heard as he rode away in the darkness through the pass. He knew where he was going. There was only one place left to go. To a place of retribution, where he would meet the man whose name he bore, and where only one name would be left—or none.

The Circle Ten would be somewhere ahead of him in the valley night . . .

CHAPTER V

Heritage by Fire

BRANDT approached the Circle Ten ranch house with his right hand at his holster. If Jeff Smoll had recognized him back at the pass—and Brandt felt reasonably sure that the killer had—then his would be an unwelcome appearance even at his father's spread. But Brandt wanted it that way. "This is showdown, for you, mom. I'm sorry it had to end this way with dad . . ." He whispered into the night breeze as

he entered the ranch yard.

Ahead, in the rough log-hewn ranch house, lights were ablaze. Behind the house, toward the corral, he could see other lights on in what was obviously the bunkhouse. A raft of horses were saddled and waiting beside the corral. Brandt noted the fact grimly. Apparently his father wasn't through . . .

Brandt dismounted slowly and walked up the steps. A short time before he had never expected to see it again. If it hadn't been for the stranger in the darkness. Somehow that man had been familiar, but who?

Purposefully, Brandt rapped his knuckles on the door.

Heavy steps approached and then the door flung open.

Harland Brandt stood in the doorway. "Is that you, Jeff?"

Brandt edged forward. He heard his father swear and reach for his gun.

Brandt drew in a lightning movement.

"I wouldn't try that—dad. I'm coming in."

The elder Brandt backed slowly into the house. His heavy bearded features were dark with wrath and his eyes were two black pools that burned into the younger man.

"It was you that tipped off the Jacksons tonight!" Harland Brandt raged. "My own son a slinkin' lowlife traitor!"

Brandt closed the door with his free hand and motioned the big man into the living room. He followed with his gun hand steady.

"There seems to be a little difference of opinion on that score," Brandt said coldly. "I've heard and seen a lot of things since I came back to the valley. I never expected to find my father at the head of a gang of range killers—a murderer himself . . ."

Harland Brandt's fingers twitched ominously. "You've got the gall to come here and say that to me after what I done for you?"

Brandt laughed. "What you did for me? The only thing you've done for me is to brand my name along with yours as one of the lowest killers in the Southwest! If maybe you're speaking of the Bar Forty—that spread belonged to my mother, and to me! I came back to claim a heritage that rightfully belonged to me. Now I find that decent people won't even mention my name without spitting!"

"Decent people!" Harland Brandt snarled the words out. "I've fought against people who was no better than me—I fought 'em and beat 'em. What I got I got rightfully—and I aim to keep it!"

"You got it outside the law," Brandt replied evenly.

"Hot lead's the only law in these parts!" Harland Brandt shot back.

"We'll see about that," Brandt said. "We'll let the law decide."

Harland Brandt frowned. "What d'you mean?"

Brandt hefted his gun with emphasis. "I'm taking you into Miraldo. I'm swearing out a warrant for your arrest. You'll stand trial for what happened tonight—and all the other crimes you and your men have done in the past."

The big man's face went slack. "You mean you'd do that to yore own father?"

BRANDT bit his lips grimly. What he had just said had been the hardest thing in his life to do. "My mother would never rest easy in her grave if I didn't," Brandt said emotionally.

Harland Brandt's face was dark with rage. "I shoulda taken Jeff's advice about you! You're not a Brandt—you're a turncoat traitor!"

Brandt steeled his lips. "You can feel that way if you want. But we're

still going in to town. Warnett may be sheriff and on your payroll, but there are marshals in St. Louis who won't be paid. Let's go."

Harland Brandt stood rocking on his heels, his fingers edging toward the holster at his hip. Brandt started to move forward, his gun hand steady.

Something hard shoved into his back.

"Drop yore gun—fast! You ain't a goin' no place!"

Brandt heard the words at the same moment. He froze, recognized the voice of Jeff Smoll.

"Mebbe yuh'd rather have a hole in yore back!" Smoll said.

Brandt looked at his father. The big range boss had a satisfied smirk on his face. "Better do what Jeff says!"

Brandt dropped his gun with a clatter. The elder Brandt scooped it off the floor and stood balancing it in his hand. Jeff Smoll moved around until Brandt could see him. The Circle Ten foreman eyed Brandt with a menacing glitter. His lips were curled down alongside his drooping mustache, and Brandt caught a glimpse of tobacco stained teeth.

"That'll teach yuh never to let an open door at yore back!" Smoll sneered. Then he switched his gaze to the elder Brandt. "Let me take care o' this coyote, boss. I ain't a forgettin' he cut down Smoke Larson!"

Harland Brandt shook his head. "I'll handle this my way! Get some rope!"

Jeff Smoll didn't like the idea, Brandt could tell. But he obeyed the range boss's orders and strode out muttering under his breath.

HARLAND BRANDT hefted Larry's gun and looked down at it. Brandt could tell that he was looking at the inlaid letters, "J. D." on the butt.

"Once before I asked you about this gun and you said you didn't know anything about it. I think you was lyin'," the big man said.

Brandt watched the other man closely, trying to figure it out. Ever since his mother had given him that gun, and ever since he had entered the valley, it had remained a mystery. This was the third time he had been questioned about it. Why? Was there some connection between it and what went on in the valley?

"I told you the truth," Brandt said. "But I think you're the one that's lying. You asked me about it once before. Maybe you know what it means."

Once again Brandt seemed to sense that his father breathed a sigh of relief —almost as if he had been fearful of Brandt's knowing something.

"All I know is that you won't be usin' it any more," Harland Brandt replied. He walked over to a desk, pulled open a drawer and put the gun inside, being careful to shift it to his left hand and draw from his own holster at the same time.

Brandt would have followed the question up, but Jeff Smoll strode into the room, a looping coil of rope across one arm.

"Yuh mean to say we're a gonna let this coyote here while we're gone?" Smoll addressed the range boss.

Harland Brandt scowled. "You let me do the thinking in this outfit! Tie him up—and do a good job. After we get back from Jackson's ranch I'll decide what to do!"

His father's words hit Brandt like a cold dash of ice water. Then he had been right in surmising what his father would do! They were actually planning a raid on the Jackson ranch! And Will Jackson had said he was pulling his men back to Crag Point! Once again Brandt had the cold feeling that everything he did played right into his father's hand. With the Jackson ranch

unprotected, his father's killers could destroy it . . .

Brandt felt his arms yanked behind him as Jeff Smoll lashed him. The ropes cut into his wrists and Brandt gritted his teeth. Smoll did a quick but thorough job. In a few moments Brandt found himself lying helpless on the floor, his arms securely lashed behind him, and his legs drawn up and fastened ankle to thigh.

"Reckon that'll hold yuh." Smoll straightened.

Harland Brandt moved toward the door. "You got the boys set to ride?"

Smoll laughed scornfully. "This is one ride they didn't have to get ready fur. They've been waitin' a long time to get Jackson!"

Brandt squirmed on his side and shouted up at them. "If you go through with this a law won't be needed to handle you! I swear to God I'll make you pay!"

Harland Brandt laughed down on him. "That's mighty funny! You had your chance to fight on the side of your blood—now you've lost it! You're no son of mine from this minute on!"

The door slammed behind them and Brandt, a cold crawling despair chilling his spine, heard Smoll laughing as they saddled up outside the house.

Moments later there was a thunderous sound as the massed Circle Ten riders swept out from the ranch. Brandt lay back on the floor, panting and beaten.

BRANDT didn't know how long he lay there. It might have been seconds, minutes or years. Time suddenly didn't matter. All he could think about was his father, riding down on the defenseless Jackson spread . . .

There was a sound suddenly.

Brandt raised his head off the floor and listened. It came again, a soft tapping. It was coming from—

The window suddenly shattered inward in a shower of glass. A head appeared, followed by a set of wide shoulders.

"Had to wait until they was gone, son."

Brandt stared at the man, recognizing him as the drifter from Miraldo, Pete Garland. But more than anything else, it was Garland's voice that stirred Brandt's memory. *It was the same voice that had rescued him from almost certain death at Crag Point! The man outside the fire!*

In stunned surprise Brandt watched as Garland came over the window sill. The drifter used only his left arm, his right hanging almost limply at his side. Once again Brandt noted the holster slung on the left hip.

"Was afraid I might have to bust in on the party earlier," Garland drawled, as he squatted beside Brandt and flicked open a pocket knife. Under the keen blade the ropes parted and Brandt staggered painfully to his feet.

"I don't understand this, Garland. You were the man who got the drop on Jackson—"

"That's right, son. Kinda looks like I got here just in time, too."

Brandt fumbled for words, trying to figure it out. Of all the people in the valley, why was Pete Garland mixing himself up in this business? And how did he happen to be on hand at just the right moment?

Garland saw the questions rising to Brandt's lips. He grinned. "Reckon we don't have much time to palaver right now, son. I heard everything that Brandt skunk said. I was hidin' in the bushes outside. I'm thinkin' we better hit leather fast if we're goin' to save Jackson."

Giving emphasis to his words, Garland patted the butt of his six-shooter.

It was that gesture that brought Brandt's attention to the gun. One thing in particular caught his eye. Set in the butt of the gun were two inlaid letters—"J.D."

"Better get yore gun, son," Garland drawled.

His brain whirling, Brandt went over to the desk and took his six-shooter from the drawer. Then he turned to Garland. "I don't have time to ask questions now, Pete, but after this is over there's a couple of things I'm going to want to know—like how come your gun has the same initials on the butt of it that mine has."

Garland had already reached the door. He turned suddenly and Brandt saw his face go grim with emotion.

"Mebbe after tonight a lot of things will be explained. But right now we've got work to do. I'm going to take a short cut to Crag Point and bring up Jackson and the boys. You hightail it toward the Double T. Try pickin' off some of those skunks till I get there."

Brandt nodded and followed Garland from the house. As they saddled up, Brandt called out:

"Maybe I better go with you—Jackson might not believe you!"

"If you was along he'd be more apt to shoot!" Garland shouted back. "He'll believe me all right!"

Then Garland had thundered off into the night. And Brandt rowelled his own horse out of the ranch. Over head the moon was peeping through cloudbanks again, and it lit a silver trail across the valley toward the Double T spread at the base of the mountains.

Brandt rode grimly ahead.

LONG before Brandt reached the Double T he saw the red outline of fire against the skyline. It rose, a dull, ruddy haze in the night. There was no doubt in Brandt's mind as to what was happening at the Double T. Unprotected, his father and the Circle Ten riders were razing the ranch to the ground.

Brandt urged his horse forward and felt the animal's flanks heave with the effort. He flung futile curses into the night and whipped out his gun.

He saw the fire then. It lit up the night like a gigantic torch. It was the ranchhouse, going up in a blaze of smoke and flame. Around it, riding like a bunch of liquor-crazed redskins from a page of history, Brandt saw the Circle Ten men, hurling flaming brands upon the already flame covered house. Their hoarse shouts filled the air, mingling with the snap and crackling roar of the fire.

Brandt brought his horse to a pawing halt on the outskirts of the ranch. Hate and anger he had never known before swept through him. He had only one thought. To kill. To wipe out the murderous blot of pillage whose name he bore.

As near as he could tell, there were some thirty men in the raid. At the distance he couldn't distinguish any one individual, but he knew his father and Jeff Smoll were in there.

It would have been sheer death to ride on into the ranch yard. He would have been cut down in a moment's time. But off to the left of the house a grove of cottonwood trees stood, outside the encircling fence of the ranch. Brandt spurred his horse toward it.

Once inside the trees' protecting closeness, Brandt jumped to the ground and ran to the grove's edge. He was now some thirty yards from the flaming house, in easy range of the madly riding Circle Ten punchers.

A horseman crossed Brandt's line of sight and his six-gun exploded. The man fell slithering to the ground.

There was a warning shout from the

others as they broke the circle and rode for safety on the other side of the house. Brandt's gun spat fire and lead into their midst and he saw two more men go limp in their saddles. Then they were out of range and Brandt could hear angry curses filling the air.

Quickly Brandt reloaded his gun and waited. He didn't have to wait long. A voice he knew drifted across the open space. It was Jeff Smoll.

"It's somebody in the cottonwoods! We'll get him from the rear!"

BRANDT watched with grim eyes as a group of men suddenly broke from cover and rode for the ranch entrance. He pumped lead at them but they kept on. Once outside, they could skirt the grove and catch him in a cross-fire.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the crash of gunfire from both sides of the house split the air, Brandt felt bullets whang into the trees around him. He hit the ground and slid behind the bole of a large cottonwood. In a few moments, he knew, the other Circle Ten men would be around the ranch gate, and into the wooded grove at his rear. "I'll go down fighting! Come and get me!" he cried out bitterly. Hot lead answered him in stinging ricochets off the trees, and Brandt turned over on his back, his gun hand ready.

The attack he expected never came. There was a sudden thunderous flurry of shots from the front of the ranch, and Brandt, sliding around the edge of the cottonwood, saw the Circle Ten riders doubling back toward the ranchhouse in a wild retreat. At their heels, guns flaming, came a mass of horsemen. A hoarse shout burst from Brandt's lips as he recognized them. Riding at their head was Peter Garland and Will Jackson!

Caught totally by surprise, the Circle Ten men beat a fast retreat toward the rear of the ranch. The Double T men swept up to the house and around it, guns flaming, and in their midst, Brandt made out the figure of Alice Coyle, her hair streaming behind her, a six-gun belching flame in her hand.

Brandt scrambled to his feet and hurtled the fence at the edge of the grove. As he hit the other side he was in time to see the girl suddenly jerk sideways in her saddle and fall to the ground.

A cry burst from his lips as he sped toward her.

He had gone only a few feet when a group of horsemen burst around from the rear of the house and cut in front of him. Brandt had to dive for the ground as bullets whistled past his head.

"It's young Brandt!"

Brandt heard a hoarse shout from the lead rider and recognized Jeff Smoll. The Circle Ten foreman spun out of the group and headed toward Brandt. Smoll's gun hand was lowered toward the ground and a harsh snarl reached Brandt's ears.

"I swore I'd get yuh! This is the payoff!"

It was. Brandt rolled sideways along the ground, aimed and fired in the same movement. Smoll's gun blasted flame at the same instant.

Hot lead fanned by Brandt's cheek in a stinging burn. At the same time, he saw his own bullet had missed Smoll. The Circle Ten men laughed harshly and Brandt saw Smoll's gun bearing down on him, scant yards away.

Brandt didn't have time to aim another shot. He knew Smoll would beat him and felt death closing in. Smoll's gun exploded just as his horse suddenly collapsed beneath him.

It was that movement that saved Brandt. Dirt splattered in his face as the killer's bullet dug into the ground.

Then Smoll was thrown clear of the dying horse and Brandt knew where his bullet had gone.

EVERYTHING was suddenly blotted out from Brandt but the figure of Jeff Smoll, crouched, as he had just risen to his feet, hatless, and with blood on his face from several deep scratches. Time whirled in Brandt's mind as he rocked erect on his own feet and realized that he was facing the same situation he had when he met Smoke Larson in a battle to the death.

Only this wasn't Smoke Larson. It was Jeff Smoll, his father's ablest killer, the man who had vowed to kill him.

There was a look of dire hate on Smoll's face as he whipped up his gun and fired.

Once again Brandt acted with an instinct that amazed him. Even as he felt a searing flame tear through his left side, his own gun exploded.

Smoll staggered back a few feet, his head suddenly twisting in the light of the flaming ranchhouse. Slowly he sagged toward the ground, and it was then that Brandt saw the round black hole in the center of Smoll's forehead. There was a look of pained surprise on the killer's face as he fell to the ground and lay still—in death.

Brandt stood for long moments in a weird fascination staring at the dead man. Just as Smoke Larson had died, Jeff Smoll now lay with a bullet in his head.

Numbing pain brought Brandt back to the realization around him. His left side was numb and he felt a hot warm stickiness running down his arm. He gritted his teeth under the pain and turned.

He had expected to see a milling mass of riders, throwing lead in a battle of death. What he saw brought a look of astonishment to his face.

A score of men lay in still positions on the ground, ringing the flaming ranch-house. But outside of the crackling roar of the blaze, there was silence. Silence and a beaten group of Circle Ten riders with their hands in the air in mute surrender. Around them, guns ready, the Double T punchers rode alert guard.

Brandt moved forward painfully. At the edge of the group of surrendered raiders, a small group of people stood. Brandt made out Will Jackson, Pete Garland, Alice Coyle—standing holding her arm tightly, and—Harland Brandt.

Brandt moved into the circle and it was Pete Garland who broke the tense silence.

"Reckon we got here just in time, son."

Brandt nodded and glanced over at the girl. Her face was tight lipped, and she was looking at him with veiled, puzzled eyes.

"I got Smoll," Brandt announced, glancing over at Harland Brandt.

THE range boss was standing, his gun at his feet and his arms limply at his side. His face was a study of rage and defeat.

Will Jackson flicked his six-shooter ominously. "There's something about this I don't savvy. How come you turned against your own father, Brandt?"

It was Pete Garland who cut in. "I reckon this is my show, Jackson. Larry over there ain't no part o' Harland Brandt!"

Brandt sucked in his breath painfully. Things were growing hazy before his eyes and his side throbbed. He heard Garland go on.

"Don't yuh recognize me, Harland Brandt? Don't yuh know the man yuh framed for a killin' twenty years ago?

Yuh ought to—yuh married my wife after she thought I was dead!"

Harland Brandt turned pale. His hands shook and his eyes bulged in astonishment.

"Driscoll! It's you! . . ."

"That's right," the drifter drawled. "I'm John Driscoll, come back from the dead after twenty years! Yuh didn't recognize me at all, did yuh, Brandt? Mebbe the way I draw now kinda fogged yore memory. I usta pull the fastest right hand in the valley—remember?

"Mebbe you'll recollect the bullet you put through my arm when yuh got the drop on me one day. That bullet paralyzed my gun hand so I've had to learn to draw with my left. Mebbe it's all comin' back to yuh now, Harland Brandt!"

Through a hazy fog of pain Larry Brandt stared incredulously at the man he had known as Pete Garland. It had all come too fast for his pain numbed mind to grasp. But gradually it was clearing for him. And then it burst like a bombshell.

"My gun!" Larry cried out suddenly. "The initials on it—J.D. . . ."

John Driscoll looked fleetingly at Larry, keeping one eye centered on Harland Brandt.

"That's right, son. That gun was mine. Your mother kept it all these years, even after she married Brandt here. You was just a mite tot then . . ."

"Then you're—" Larry choked on his words.

"I'm your father. And I've come back to pay off a dirty murderin' skunk!"

WHAT happened next came almost too fast for Larry Brandt's numbed senses to grasp. Harland Brandt let out a cry of hate and scooped his six-gun from the ground in a lightning movement. It happened so fast it caught the others by surprise, and the range boss had the drop on them.

"Maybe you've come back—Driscoll, but you'll leave feet first!"

His gun bucked in his hand at the same moment.

But another blast from a six-shooter thundered a split second sooner. In a moment more rapid than Larry Brandt had ever seen, John Driscoll drew and fired in the same instant. Two more shots followed in close succession from Driscoll's left hand.

Harland Brandt, a look of shocked surprise on his face, slumped to the ground. He dropped and lay still, a red stream covering his chest.

"I've paid a lot off now, Nancy . . ."

Larry Brandt heard his father say in the stunned silence following the gunshots. It was too much for him. The red haze closed in over his mind and the ache in his side became a sledge hammer beating him into unconsciousness. He felt himself falling and couldn't stop. He saw Alice Coyle running toward him, his name calling out from her lips. But she couldn't beat the darkness.

BRIGHT sunlight streamed through the windows of the living room of the Circle Ten ranchhouse. Larry Brandt felt its warmth from the couch he was lying on. His left side was bandaged tightly and the pain had subsided to a dull ache.

On the floor beside him, her fingers clasped tightly in his own, Alice Coyle knelt, a bandage showing on her own right arm, and her eyes soft and brown as she smiled at him.

"Feeling better—Larry?"

Behind her Will Jackson and John Driscoll looked at one another. Jackson laughed.

"I reckon it's gonna be kind of a job

gettin' these names straightened out 'round here!"

Driscoll drawled, "Don't reckon that'll be much of a problem, Will. Larry was born with my name, and I guess mebbe he'll do right well with it now. We've got a whole valley to reshape, and I'm a thinkin' the Driscolls and Jackson's will be heard from. And, of course, the Coyles!"

Larry spoke slowly, looking into the eyes of the girl. "Personally I think there are too many names around here. As Larry Brandt, I can't ask you—but as Larry Driscoll I can. You heard what dad said, Alice. Driscoll is a pretty good name."

She swayed closer to him, happiness glowing in her eyes. "I think it is too, Larry . . . much better than mine . . ."

She was kissing him when the front door banged open and, pigtail wagging behind him, Billy Wong shuffled into the house, his arms loaded with pots and skillets.

"Hello evlybody! Billy Wong make big time liding with klitchen stuff! Make big celeblation, have big time, make lally John o.k. No tlouble, evlything nice, evlybody happy!"

The rattle of pots and pans followed the sing-song voice down the hall toward the kitchen.

And the noises and aromas that drifted into the living room soon after were very pleasant indeed.

But Larry Driscoll wasn't aware of them.

ACCORDING TO THE INDIANS

By R. CLAYTON

ACCORDING to an old Indian legend, the sun, the moon, and the stars all are members of one related family of stellar bodies. The sun is thought of as being the chief and supreme ruler of the heavens. The moon is the wife of the sun and the stars are their children. According to the Indians, the sun arises every morning in the east and makes his way across the sky in an effort to catch some of his children so that he can eat them and keep alive.

But the stars are too fast for their father, the sun, and run out of sight as the sun arises. When the sun is tired of chasing his children, he slowly makes his way into his hole in the west. He enters this hole and crawls along till he reaches the center of the earth, where he finds his narrow bed and goes to sleep. The bed is supposed to be so narrow and the hole leading to the center of the earth so small, that when the sun awakes the following morning he cannot turn himself around and must creep out of his eastern entrance.

The moon is a very devoted Mother and when the sun has caught some of her precious children and consumed them, she mourns and carries on something awful. At the first of every month, she always covers her face with black to show her mourning. The sorrow, however, soon wears off, and at the end of the month the mother moon is again her happy self as she makes her way among her dancing children with a smiling face.

THE state of Illinois is named from a tribe of Indians called the Illini who inhabited most of the state in the 17th century when Father Jacques Marquette, the French missionary, entered the territory. The word Michigan is an Indian one which is said by many people, who are well versed in Indian lore, to mean "big lake" or "great lake." Minnesota also is an Indian word which means "muddy water" or "cloudy water." The word Iowa was formerly the title given to a tribe of Indians by a different tribe who inhabited the region which is now the state of Iowa. The word, Iowa, means "drousy ones" or "sleepy ones." However, at first a river was named Iowa and later the state was named after the river. The name Wisconsin is derived from a Sauk Indian word which has reference to birds' nests in the banks of a stream. Marquette first gave a stream the name, "Mish-kau-sing."

After several revisions the word Wisconsin was adopted. The word Wyoming is a derivation of the Delaware Indian word "maughwau-wa-ma" which means "extensive meadows" or "huge plains." This name was first used in the East but was later carried over and applied to the territory now known as the state of Wyoming. Also, Nebraska is a Sioux Indian word which means "broad water" or "shallow water." It is believed that at first this name was applied to the Platte River by the Indians and then the white explorers designated the whole surrounding territory as Nebraska.

WILD KILLER

By Robert Moore Williams

It was just a kitten when Old Ben shot its mother—but now it was grown up, and a mountain lion is no pet!

Old Ben lowered his rifle with an air of shocked surprise. "It's Kitty, dang it!" he said

"WHY, dang me, there's a lion cub!" Long John Richards shouted.

Old Ben concealed the very real start of surprise the sheepman's words gave him. Then he tried to look surprised. "Danged fool cat!" he swore under his breath. "Danged fool cat! Tryin' to git himself killed and me fired!"

"Where is it, boss?" he asked aloud. He looked down the rocky slope, up the walls of the canyon, in the clumps of pine, everywhere except where Richards was pointing.

"There!" Richards said fiercely. "Right around the corner of the shack."

"Well I'll go to hell!" Old Ben Hooker gasped.

Peeping around the corner of the shack the sheepherders used when the flocks were pasturing on the lower ranges was the round, inquisitive, mottled face of a four-month old mountain lion cub, known at various times and in different sections of the United States as the puma, the cougar, and the panther. The gnawed remnants of a tattered piece of string hung limply around his neck. It stared at the two men, blinking tawny, impish, entirely unafraid eyes at them.

"Where in the hell do you suppose he could have come from?" Old Ben demanded.

"It ain't where he come from that matters," Richards answered. "It's

where he's going."

Long John Richards was tall and lean, with the reputation of being a hard and bitter man, quick on the trigger. An old-time cattleman, reduced circumstances had forced him to turn to raising sheep. The turn had apparently permanently soured his disposition. Because in his heart he could not bring himself to really like the woolly creatures out of which he made his living, he had never given his flocks the time and attention they should have had, with the result that he was always playing touch and go with failure. A few lambs lost to the coyotes—or to a hungry lion—might make the difference between profit and loss in one of his flocks.

Old Ben saw his boss start to pull the gun. In his heart was consternation. "Don't do it!" he shouted.

Richards looked at him. "Don't do what?" he demanded.

"Don't shoot Kitty," Old Ben answered.

"Don't shoot it? Have you gone crazy? It's a danged lion, ain't it? Want to let it grow up and start killing lambs? Of course I'm going to shoot it." Richards got this far before he fully realized what Old Ben had said. Realization brought a startling change to his face. Slowly he let the pistol slide back into its holster. "Don't shoot *what?*" he demanded. "What did you call that danged lion?"

"Uh-huh—that is—"

"What did you call that critter?"

"Uh—" Old Ben's tongue clung to the top of his mouth. There were things he desperately wanted to say but he had the sure and certain knowledge that saying them would get him into trouble. He saw the trap his impulsive shout had gotten him into but he couldn't see any way out of it. "Uh—that is— Said it seems a pity—"

"You called that critter 'Kitty'," Richards stated flatly.

"Well—"

"He's got a string around his neck."

"Why, so he has!" Old Ben answered, astonished.

"That means somebody has had him tied up."

"Might look that way to some people."

"Ben," Richards said bluntly. "What do you know about this?"

"Me? Why, I—"

"Quit trying to stall! You know the name of this cat. There's a string around his neck. You probably found him when he was a week or two old and you've been trying to make a pet out of him. You probably had him tied up somewhere so I wouldn't see him but he gnawed the string in two and came back to the shack."

THERE was cold and hard logic in the sheepman's words. Old Ben dropped his eyes to the ground. "That's right, boss," he finally admitted. "I killed his maw."

"That's what I thought!" Richards snorted. "Why didn't you kill him too?"

Old Ben tried to answer. Again the words wouldn't come. Why hadn't he killed the cub? He tried to think. The thoughts that came into his mind were of long, dull days, of lonely nights, of weeks when he didn't see a human being. The life of a sheepherder was so lonely! In his loneliness, the helpless kitten had appealed to him. It was something little, something to pet, something to take care of, something to love. He had fought to keep it warm, fought to find food for it, fought to keep it alive. In the months that had passed since he found it, the cub had become the dearest thing in his life. He loved it. Something like this was all a sheepherder had to love.

To try to tell all of this to Long John

Richards was silly, and Old Ben knew it. He shrugged.

"Lions kill sheep," the sheepman said.

"Know they do."

"One lion might kill fifty sheep in a few months."

Old Ben miserably nodded. He knew what a mountain lion could do to a flock of woolies. He had seen flocks that a lion had got into. Only in this case it wouldn't happen.

"I'm going to raise him up tame, boss," he pleaded. "I'll learn him never to touch a sheep."

"It can't be done, Ben," Richards flatly contradicted. "You can't tame a wolf, a coyote, or a mountain lion. They always go back to the wild. Their nature is to kill and they always turn into killers."

"This one won't," Old Ben protested. "I got him when he was so little he can't remember anything about being wild."

"It'll come out in him when he grows up," Richards stated. "If you don't believe me, look at that."

The cub had come around the corner of the shack. It was stalking Old Ben. Belly close to the ground, tail straight out behind it, taking a few quick steps at a time and then standing stock still, stopping, then moving quickly again, there was no question what it was doing. It hadn't been taught to stalk, it hadn't been taught to hunt. Yet here it was going through the whole pattern of the killer. Old Ben stared at it in consternation.

GROWLING, it made a fierce rush at his leg, then stopped, rubbed against the frayed bottoms of his old blue levis, arching its back.

"It's only playing a game," Old Ben said in quick relief. "Only a game. Kitty was only playing, wasn't you, Kitty?" He rubbed his toe under the cub's stomach. It rolled over and pretended to bite his foot.

"Game my foot!" Richards blurted. "That's the way they start. It's a game today but tomorrow it will be in dead earnest. Ben, you've got to get rid of that cat."

Old Ben stood silent, numbed. There was finality in the sheepman's words but he just couldn't bring himself to agree. Killing Kitty would be like killing part of himself. Slowly he shook his head. "I just can't do it."

"Then I'll do it for you!" Richards reached for his gun the second time.

An instant later the muzzle of a gun was jammed into his ribs and he was looking into Old Ben's blazing eyes.

"You hurt Kitty and I'll kill you," Old Ben said fiercely.

Richards stared at the herder in dumfounded amazement. Both of them were westerners. Both had a habit of meaning what they said.

"Ben—"

"I mean it!"

Their gaze met, clashed, battled. Neither faltered.

"I ought to fire you," Richards said.

"I'm expecting it," Old Ben answered.

"You old fool, where would you get another job?"

"I could manage."

"Giving up a good job for a danged ornery cat!"

The herder nodded. "I ain't gonna have Kitty killed."

Richards dropped his eyes. "Well, I ain't gonna fire you either," he grunted. "Not now. If you're so dead set on keeping that cat, you can keep him—but the minute he turns wild and starts killing sheep I'm not only going to fire you but I'm going to kill him myself. Do you get it?"

Old Ben swallowed. He nodded.

Without another word, Richards

mounted his horse and rode off in grim silence. The silence was bad. Old Ben knew that the sheepman would back up his threat. If the cat ever turned into a killer— He looked down at the ground.

The round ball of fur was chasing its tail. It left off to chase a drifting leaf, scurrying after it, then stopped to chase a beetle. The bug's powerful pincers nipped the kitten on the nose. Spitting, it scurried to Old Ben for protection. He reached down, patted it. "You won't ever turn into a killer, will you, Kitty?"

THAT night, in front of the open fire place in the little cabin, a ball of mottled yellow fur alternately chased its tail and a piece of string dangled from the herder's hand. "Can't tame a lion, huh?" Old Ben said. "I'd like to know why lions can't be tamed any more than dogs. Dogs was wild once, as wild as lions. The only reason big cats ain't been tamed is because nobody has ever tried."

This was early spring. During the summer, when the flocks moved by slow stages to the upper ranges, Old Ben took the cub with him. It was growing rapidly now, its body filling out, the milk teeth firming, the claws lengthening. Old Ben watched it closely. It was the friendliest creature he had ever known. For hours on end, while the sheep were grazing quietly, he played with it. Never did it give any indication that it was aware of its heritage. Late summer had come before it gave the first sign that it knew what those sharp teeth, those long curved claws were for. Old Ben, watching a little valley from the slope above, saw this thing happen.

Down below him Kitty was playing. As he watched, he saw it stop playing, begin to stalk a clump of weeds. At first he thought it was only playing a game. Then he saw it leap. A fierce squeal echoed through the air.

The cub came out of the weeds. The limp carcass of a dead rabbit dangled from its jaws. It sat down, began to eat.

From that hour on, it ceased eating the food Old Ben gave it. It was still friendly, playful, but it would only sniff at canned milk and it turned up its nose at the bits of meat he gave it.

"Would you rather catch your meat yourself?" Old Ben questioned, sighing.

Now it spent every night hunting, returning to Old Ben with each dawn to curl up on his bedding roll and sleep the whole day through. Every morning when he awakened he would find it snuggled up against his back. It was growing even faster now.

Old Ben watched it closely. It had been raised with sheep and never did it offer to molest them while he was watching. It seemed to accept them as being part of the landscape, to ignore them completely.

"It ain't never touched a sheep," Old Ben glowed. "It never will."

Fall came, the grass turned brown, dead leaves scurried along the ground. Cold winds blew down from the high ranges, warning of snow and winter and cold.

One morning when Old Ben awakened he realized that Kitty was not asleep on his bedding roll.

"First time Kitty never came in," Old Ben worried. "He'll be here by the time I get breakfast over," he reassured himself.

Breakfast was over and the cat had not returned.

"Maybe something happened to him," Old Ben thought. "Maybe I better go look."

HE WAS camped on the lower ranges, a land of rolling foothills broken to the west by rugged canyons.

The sharp wind was blowing down from the mountains beyond. Levering a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle, he climbed the nearest hill. In the bottom of the gulch beyond he saw a motionless white blotch—a dead sheep. Beside it was a brown blur.

"A lion!" Old Ben gasped. "A lion eating a sheep!"

The rifle leaped to his shoulder, he lined up the sights on the brown blur. The hammer clicked as it slid back. His finger tightened on the trigger.

The lion continued feeding, unaware of his presence on the hill above it. The sights of the rifle covered it. Old Ben tried to pull the trigger.

"Oh, golly, it's Kitty!" he thought.

His finger loosened on the trigger. The sights wavered, swung away from the dark blotch. He tried to bring them back, tried and failed. At the same instant a horseman appeared on the other side of the gulch. He saw the dead sheep and the feeding lion, jerked his rifle from his scabbard, swung off his horse. Even at that distance, Old Ben recognized Long John Richards.

Smoke puffed from the rifle and the sharp crack of the gun echoed along the gulch. The startled lion screeched, leaped into the air, then was a brown, three-legged streak running up the gulch. Even with one leg apparently broken by the first shot, the beast made amazing speed. Long John Richards pumped rifle bullets all around it, missed. The lion disappeared.

Long John and Old Ben met at the body of the dead sheep. Long John's eyes were hard and cold. "You out of ammunition, Ben?" he questioned.

The herder shook his head. He knew what was coming next and he was trying to think what to say.

"I didn't notice you burning any powder."

"N — o."

"You saw the lion, didn't you?"

"Yes, I saw him."

"Then why didn't you shoot?"

Old Ben said nothing.

"Even after your pet lion turned killer you didn't have the guts to shoot him. Is that the answer, Ben?"

"I— Oh, hell, boss—"

Without another word, Richards turned and started trailing the lion up the gulch, following the spots of blood. The sheepman held his rifle at the ready.

Old Ben followed.

IN COLD silence, Long John trailed the lion up the gulch, reading sign with the expertness of an Indian. The gulch deepened into a rocky, walled canyon. In a sandy spot the trail of the lion was plainly visible. He was using only three legs.

"You got him in the right hind foot," Old Ben volunteered.

Richards did not answer. Old Ben was beginning to realize what a bad thing he had done. Raising a lion that grew up and killed sheep was like slipping a rattler into the bed of your best friend, for a joke.

The canyon walls narrowed and the floor became strewn with boulders. Here the trail was hard to follow. Only an occasional spot of blood showed where the wounded cat had scrambled over the rocks.

For the first time, Richards spoke. "If I lose the trail and the damned cat gets away—"

His cold eyes drilled into the herder. Old Ben looked at the ground. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the shadow leap from a ledge on the wall of the canyon.

"Look out, boss!" he yelled. He tried to leap backward, tripped over a boulder, fell head over heels, his rifle spinning from his hands.

The shadow leaping from the ledge was—the lion! The wounded cat had doubled back on its trail and had laid in wait for its enemies. It had tried to run but when it could run no longer, it had laid in wait and had charged with all the ferocious courage of its kind. With a scream that set the canyon ringing, the wounded cat leaped straight at Long John Richards.

The sheepman threw his rifle up. A fur-covered front paw lashed at it, knocked it rattling among the boulders.

In the mighty forearms of the lion was the strength to bring down a yearling steer. With the exception of the grizzly bear, the lion was the mightiest killing machine in the mountains. When one of them got a man down, there wasn't much to do except bury the bloody remnants.

Old Ben saw Richards go over, heard the fierce squall of the cat. He got one glimpse of tawny fur and faded blue levis all mixed together. Even if he had had his rifle he couldn't have used it. Yelling, he slapped at the beast with his hat.

The lion turned red, glaring eyes at this new menace. Rearing on its hind legs, it slapped at Old Ben. When he ducked out of range, it screamed and charged him. He had a glimpse of glaring eyes and gleaming teeth, of a roaring beast screaming as it charged. He fell forward, intending to roll into a ball. As he fell he saw a second shadow leap from the ledge along the canyon wall. Old Ben's only thought during the split second he had left to think was that the cat's mate was joining the battle.

The shadow leaped not at Old Ben—nor at Long John Richards trying to scramble to his feet—but at the first cat.

In the hundredth part of a second, two screaming fur-covered tornadoes were tearing at each other.

OLD BEN scrambled for his rifle, got it, but failed to use it. He was vaguely aware that Long John, blood streaming from a gash in his head, had got to his feet, grabbed his own rifle, and was standing beside him. Richards made no effort to use his gun. They watched.

At the top of his voice Old Ben was yelling. *"Get him, Kitty!* Get him! Tear him to pieces."

He had recognized that second shadow. Kitty! With recognition came the realization that they had made a mistake. There were two young lions in this section, two young lions who looked so much alike it was almost impossible to tell them apart.

Kitty had been lying on the ledge sleeping. He had awakened when the two men came into sight. He had not seen the other lion until it leaped from the ledge to attack Long John. Kitty had not known what to do. Somewhere in his feline mind was the knowledge that the sheepman was no friend of his.

When the killer had attacked Old Ben, Kitty had known what to do. And did it!

Screaming like wounded banshees, the two lions tore at each other. Mighty forepaws struck out with the speed of striking snakes. Brown fur flew into the air.

"By gad!" Richards muttered, fingering his rifle. "By gad!"

"Don't shoot!" Old Ben shouted. "Don't shoot. That's Kitty."

"Think I'm a damned fool!" Long John grunted. "Think I'm going to shoot a cat that saved my life?"

As he spoke, Kitty's teeth sank into the neck of the other lion. There was a crunching snap, then silence. Kitty shook the dead lion, shook it again and again, then lifted his head to stare at

the two men.

Old Ben moved slowly toward him. "Easy, Kitty," he whispered. "Easy," he extended his hand.

The young lion watched him come. The light of battle was in its eyes.

"Easy, Kitty," Old Ben whispered. He bent over to touch the lion.

It flinched away from him. It seemed to want to come to him and want to run away. It looked at him, reached up and licked his hand. Then it looked past him, at Long John Richards. Slowly, an inch at a time, it began to back away.

Like a shadow, Kitty slid along the canyon, disappeared.

"I don't think we'll ever see him again," Old Ben said wistfully, with something of pride in his voice. "I think he's going back to the wild. I did wrong, Long John, in trying to tame him. He wasn't intended to be tamed. But he didn't kill that sheep and somehow I don't think he ever will kill one."

"What the hell if he does?" Long John grunted. "What the hell's a few sheep more or less?"

That was the last time Old Ben ever saw Kitty. But now and then, when he rises from his bedding roll in the morning, he finds the marks of lion pads near his camp. Although he never sees Kitty, he knows that often, in the night, Kitty comes to see him. He likes to think that Kitty wants to know if everything is all right with Old Ben. Everything is.

PHYSICAL COURAGE

HAS THE INDIAN THE MOST?

ARE there differences between the races in withstanding pain? One scientist wanted to know if Indians can "take" it better than white men can. He chose several subjects from each group and applied a stylus to the skin, increasing the pressure until the subject admitted pain. He found that, as a group, the Indians absorbed more pressure than the whites before indicating that it was hurting them.

Do these results show that the Indian has the natural trait of fortitude? Are Indians born with such a pain-enduring personality? Or are Indians trained to be so?

Scientific observation has shown that within the Indian culture, as contrasted to the white man's culture, lies the answer. The Indian, from the cradle to his death, is taught to tolerate pain. His first experience might have been the great pressure felt by being tightly bound to a cradle board. If he comes from a tribe whose ideal is a certain shape of skull, he is made to carry heavy weights on his head. During childhood, the Indian boy is not sheltered from stark reality. He hears countless stories of the exploits of brave men, of harrowing experiences, of warriors, bloodshed, and death. Life soon assumes a grimness, a sacrificing attitude quite rare in the fairy-tale existence of white-men's children. Later, the Indian youth has to undergo the trying ceremonies accompanying adolescence. He is subject to as many trials as is necessary to establish him in the minds of the tribe's elders as a man—and a man who can assume the responsibilities and withstand the hardships of a difficult life. It goes without saying that pain is introduced early in the Indians' life as a powerful instructor!

With us, things are quite different. Children's eyes are shielded from all scenes of suffering. Admitting that one has aches and pains is hardly a disgrace. We answer pain wiith drugs and anaesthetics, not with endurance. And even the approach of maturity does not scare us into so much extra preparation. The very nature of our society, with all its conveniences and securities, makes such "endurance training" unnecessary.

Society and personality, then, are closely related. It is not difficult to understand now why the product of a primitive culture shows more physical courage than the product of modern culture. Such traits are not inborn. Pain has been adopted by the Indian kindergarten as the most influential teacher.—*Sandy Miller.*

BUY VICTORY BONDS

They say it takes a man to run a ranch so Eve was up against a problem—unless it was true that she wasn't a lady

IN MY time I've popped brush in New Mexico, hopped prairie dog holes in Texas, rode Injun trails through the Territory and slapped an iron on many a slick ear in Kansas when Dodge City was the cow capital of the southwest. That means I had many a boss, some I've forgot and some I ain't. Eve Parsons was the kind you don't forget.

Eve was the only lady boss I ever had. Only I need to say it different for Eve was no lady. She was the best all-around hand I ever saw fork a saddle and that's not even excepting me, Peg-leg Gibson, who rode everything I ever saw on four legs until that outlaw bronc rolled on me at the Cheyenne rodeo and smashed my leg to splinters.

Saying Eve forked a saddle explains what I mean by saying she was no lady. In those days Kansas ladies rode side saddle and their long skirts hid all of their legs and even the foot in the stirrup. But not Eve Parsons. She dressed like a man and rode like a man. "I'm doing a man's work," she argued, "so why shouldn't I look like a man?" Which made it all right with us but got her talked about considerably over the country.

If Eve heard the talk she paid no mind to it. She was too busy ramrodding that Cold River spread along the

It was as plain as the nose on your face that Eve was faking; she wasn't the kind to fall off a horse

EVE WAS NO LADY

By Ennen Reaves Hall

border that old Al Parsons had left on her hands when some border outlaws give him lead poisoning. And too busy to get married. By the reckoning of the times, Eve was practically an old maid when I went to ride for her after they'd turned me loose from that Cheyenne hospital with a wooden peg below my left knee and empty pockets. Twenty-two she was then, and men were just hands to her. And few of them thought of her as a woman. She was just a danged good boss and we respected her.

Me, I guess I had a special feeling for her. From that first day when I rode up and asked for a job in likely the same voice a beggar asks for a hand out and she says to me: "Why not? I need a top hand and you look like one to me. Legs ain't the only thing a puncher needs. If you've got guts and brains you'll get along all right." I reckon I'd have laid down and let her walk over me just any time. That's how I felt about Eve Parsons and me nigh old enough then for her daddy.

None of us ever suspected Eve wasn't completely satisfied with her life as lady boss of the Cold River Ranch. That is, not until Lora Austin come to visit us. Lora was Eve's room mate at that stylish St. Louis school where she was when Al Parsons got killed. A couple summers after I got there Lora decided to get herself some free grub and see how a cattle ranch was run. Eve talked to me about it the day she got Lora's letter and I could see she was worried.

"Of course I'm glad to have Lora, Peg," she says. "She's my oldest friend and she's had a lot of trouble with her husband and had to get a divorce. I'm sorry for her and all that. But I just don't know about her coming here. Lora's quite a lady and not used to our rough ways. I'm afraid she won't like it."

By then I was used to dishing out advice to Eve. "If she don't like us she won't have to stay," I told her. "She won't be hogtied nor hobbled."

SO LORA AUSTIN came and I went into Caldwell with Eve to meet her. Not that it was necessary. Eve could have handled those high stepping roans that we drove to the buckboard just as well as me but she thought it would impress the city gal to have a driver, I guess. Anyway, I went.

And was that Lora Austin elegant! Dang my hide, but these modern boys would have howled like wolves if they'd seen her. Me, I pretty near swallowed my Adam's Apple. I'd never seen anything like her, not even at Cheyenne rodeos. Purty as a picture, but in a china doll sort of way, and dressed to kill in one of them long dresses with frills and furbelows from top to bottom. A hat as big as a water bucket set on top of a big wad of gold colored hair and hanging down from it was a couple of them curly ostrich feathers nigh long enough to touch her waist, and it drawed in so tight a man could near about span it with his hands.

Them roans didn't like steam engines so I stayed in the buckboard while Eve got out to meet Lora. They was still a-hugging when they got to the buggy and then they squared off to look each other over.

Lora let out a screetch when she saw how Eve was dressed. "My goodness, Eve," she yelps, "do you have to look like that on a ranch? I'm afraid I'll be very much out of place if you do."

Eve just laughed, the way nobody but Eve could. "You couldn't look like me if you tried, Lora," she says. "My, but you are pretty!"

Seemed to me Eve sounded envious then. Though she shouldn't be I thought then and always. Nobody could be

prettier'n Eve, with her dark, velvet soft eyes and hair like one of them summer storm clouds and a mouth that had laughed so much it just stayed ready looking. Lora's mouth, now, sort of spoiled her looks. Seemed to be all fixed to say prunes just any minute.

Eve had a way of making a fellow feel important. I did that day when she introduced me and Lora. "This here's my top hand, Mr. Gibson, Lora. But we call him plain Peg."

I thumbed back my Stetson real polite and told her I was pleased to meet her. She smiled and gathered up those long skirts and started climbing in beside me. Just as she set down she let out a gasp like she'd flounced down on a pin. I looked and saw she was staring at that peg of mine like it was a snake.

"Mercy me," she says, "you're not driving these wild horses with just one leg, are you?"

"No, ma'am," I says, as politely as I know how. "I'm a-driving them with both hands."

Eve put in right quick, before Lora could do more than pucker up her mouth like something tasted bad. "Peg's a better man with one leg than most are with two, Lora," says she. "He can handle these roans if anybody can."

THERE wasn't much talking done the trip back. Just for pure pizen meanness I give those roans their heads and Lora was hard put just to hang on. By what she didn't say I knew Eve was liking it.

We all eat in the big house with Eve. That way Ling, the Chinee cook who was getting old and one helper, could do it all. And the way Eve put it, "I don't work any harder than the rest of you so I don't need any different grub" made it all right. And after supper every night I had got in the way of setting on the porch a spell and chinning while I smoked. That night I started off and Eve called me back.

"Ain't nobody in your chair, Peg," she says. "Why don't you rest that chunk of wood?" That was the way Eve and me joshed. So I stumped back and set down and stoked up my pipe and ignored that Lora like she wasn't there, the same way she was doing me.

But I didn't listen to her chatter till I heard her saying, "Eve, how come you've never married? Just ain't natural. Aint' this wild country got no eligible men at all?" Only, of course, them gals talk book grammer and I don't.

Eve just laughed. "Plenty of men, Lora. And some fine waddies. But I'm just too busy to think about marrying."

Lora looked wise. "No woman ever got too busy to think about marrying, Eve. You mean you're too busy to get the men to thinking about it."

She leaned over, letting her china blue eyes run in circles over Eve's trim figger in levis and flannel shirt. "Why, just look at you, Eve. You couldn't expect a man to fall in love with you, could you?"

Eve jumped like a prodded steer. "What's the matter with me, Lora? Am I that bad?"

"You're not bad atall," Miss Know-it-all says. "But you're just not feminine. You look like a man and you act like a man. You can't expect a man to fall in love with another man, can you?"

This time Eve's laugh didn't sound quite natural. "No," she says, "I really hadn't been expecting any man to fall in love with me, Lora. But . . ."

Lora fairly pounced, like a hawk spotting a chicken. "And that's why they haven't! Eve, darling, don't you know it's up to the woman every time? She's got to make herself attractive and

appealing. Men are vain creatures and they want to be made to feel very smart and superior. No man wants a wife who can ride and shoot as well as he can. Why, take that good-looking cowboy you call Rusty. At supper tonight he said you were a good scout."

She stopped to laugh and the tinkling sound was full of scorn. "But who ever heard of a man losing his heart to a good scout?"

"But I'm not wanting Rusty to lose his heart to me, Lora." Eve was starting to sound plum nettled.

Lora sighed so loud sounded like a breeze springing up. "Not Rusty, maybe. But some day, Eve, you'll see a man you want and you won't know how to ketch him. He'll never look twice at you with you acting so superior and bossy . . ."

I'D HAD enough twaddle by then. And across the yard I seen Rusty and Chuck Taylor coming with guitars under their arms and I knowed they wasn't thinking of playing tunes for Eve so it looked like maybe Lora had scored a point. I went off to bed.

Every day was the same after that. Every cowpoke on the place spent more time shining his boots and rubbing grease in his hair than he did working. And when they wasn't sprucing up they was a-helping Lora on or off a horse or up a step or rescuing her from a wild yearling that wouldn't have shook a horn at a mosquito. Seemed to me Lora played up that idee of being helpless too far but couldn't nobody deny it was working. Got so you couldn't see the gal for the rannies around her and every boss for miles around was complaining about the things that wasn't getting done. Except Eve. She didn't say anything, but she went around with a thoughtful look in her eye. I begin to get nervous for fear Lora had give Eve idees we wouldn't like her having.

I knowed it for sure the day Lora come riding up with a stranger. A danged good looking rannie, too. Tall in the saddle he set, with a swing to his wide shoulders that made you know he was range born and bred and a clean look to his face that give the lie to the coating of trail dust on him. And he was riding side by side with Lora, his arm around her like he was afraid she'd fall off.

Eve and me was in the tack shed, mending gear. She looked out and saw them and drew in her breath sharp like. "Who is he, Peg? I never seen him before." And it sounded just like she'd said "I never seen anything like him."

Then she busted out of there like a boogered steer and me on her heels. For we'd both seen that rannie lifting Lora down like she was a sack of spuds and started off to the house carrying her. We figgered the gal had a couple of broken legs at least.

"What's the matter with Lora?" Eve asked him. "What happened, Mister?"

He never even looked at Eve. Just down at that golden head draped over his shoulder, and the pretty face with her eyes shut like she was asleep.

"She fell off her horse," he says. "I guess I scared her." Then he added, and his voice was as soft as Ling's mush cakes. "Poor little thing. She shouldn't have been out alone on a mean bronc like that."

I could have laughed at that. Natcherally we give Lora the tamest cayuse we had on the place and nothing could have scared him into wrinkling his spine or stampeding. If Lora fell off it was because she wanted to.

EVE run ahead and fixed a place to lay Lora. Soon's that gal left him turn loose of her she opened her eyes

wide enough not to miss anything. "Oh, Tex," she sighed, "you're wonderful. I'm sorry I was such a baby."

"You wasn't, Ma'am," he told her, sounding like he was gargling his throat with axle grease, "couldn't no woman have handled that brute any better. Now you lie still and I'll go hunt up this boss I got to see."

Outside he turned to me, still not seeming to see Eve. "Where bouts is yore segundo? I'm Tex Duncan and I got a herd waiting at the edge of the hills to be cut."

Eve spoke up. "I'm Eve Parsons and all the boss there is. When you want to work the herd, Mister?"

He grabbed off his hat like he'd just seen she was a woman. And found something wrong, to judge by his frown. "I heard this spread had a woman owner. But you can't mean you ramrod, too?"

"I sure do," Eve tells him. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

He was sure a polite rannie. "My apologies, Ma'am," he says. "But being a Texas man I just ain't used to talking business with wimmin. We can cut today, if it's all right with you. I thought we'd bed down tonight where we are and shove on tomorrow."

Eve says, all business, "I'll have men there in an hour."

But there's a funny look in her eye as she stares after Tex Duncan. "Maybe," she says so low I can barely hear her, "Lora's got the right idea."

She went with us, like she always done when there was cutting to do. But she didn't talk any and that funny look was still in her eyes when we got to where the Texas longhorns were being held and this Duncan come riding up, grabbing for his hat brim again.

"I reckon you come along to watch, Ma'am," he says. "So if you want you can set in the chuck wagon. Some of these critters are sort of wild and I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

We'd have laughed at that if the look on Eve's face hadn't stopped us. Her set on the sidelines and watch her men work? Always we counted on Eve helping to hold the cut, which takes an extra special brand of riding. Rusty and Chuck rode off, thinking she'd do that again.

But dang my britches if Eve didn't say to him, sounding exactly like Lora: "Thank you so much, Mister Duncan—Tex. Of course I knew I'd be in the way but I'm trying so hard to learn all about my ranch business, so I won't make mistakes."

His eyes gentled as he started being sorry for her. "It's sure no job for a lady, Ma'am. What you need is a good segundo to look after things like this for you. But don't you bother about this cut. We'll help and see you get a square deal."

PLUM disgusted, I rode over to hold the cut, as always. Eve trailed along and Rusty and Chuck figured she was helping me and that the two of us could hold anything on legs. So the first critter they pushed out was a rangy two-year-old steer that stampeded straight for the tall timber. Eve was right in his path and I thought sure she'd turn him. Instead she spurred out of his way, trying hard to look scairt. I took after the steer and behind me I could hear Tex Duncan giving the boys hell.

"Don't you know better'n to push out a loco like that first thing?" he yelled. "Suppose Miss Parsons' horse had thrown her?"

I heard the boys laughing at that and just as I got that locoed steer turned I saw Tex climbing off his horse and starting for them. "Where I come from," he says, mad as hell, "we treat wimmin with respect. If you loud

mouths don't know how to act before a lady I'm raring to teach you."

About then Eve decided she'd better stop what she'd started. Managing to look as scared as she sounded, she told Tex, "Please, Tex, don't have any trouble with the boys. Fighting scares me so. After this I'll just set in the chuck wagon and stay out of the way."

And danged if she didn't do just that! And when the cutting was finally done she let the rest of us herd the culls back to home range while she raised dust straight for the house.

Rusty and Chuck was plum puzzled. "What in hell's eating Eve?" they wanted to know. "She acted plum loco."

"She acted like Lora," I told them. "And from the way you both been acting you ought to like that." That shut them up, whatever they thought. And I didn't have any mind for laughing myself, having the feeling that Eve wasn't trying to be funny. She looked plum serious.

When I got to the house she was setting on the porch fiddling with her hair. She washed it and danged if she wasn't trying to make it frizzle up into curls like Lora's. I couldn't hold back any longer.

"What's the idee acting greenhorn, Eve? You thinking of throwing a hungry loop for that Texan?"

She smiled, but her eyes were dreamy looking. "Nobody ever snared a longhorn without first throwing a loop, Peg. And Tex likes his wimmin to be wimmin. Lora says so. Tell me, Peg, would I be pretty as Lora dressed up like her?"

"You're a danged sight purtier like you are," I told her, but she wasn't listening. She was fair slopping over with excitement.

"We're going to have a shindig tonight, Peg. I invited Tex and his boys over and you can fiddle for us and we'll dance. And Lora's going to lend me a party dress and I'm going to look and act like a lady if it kills me. And any of you rannies laugh you'll get fired sure as hell."

SEEING how in earnest she was I didn't laugh. I just says: "You sure this Tex is worth all the trouble, Eve?"

She looked straight at me then and there was something in her eyes made my own start smarting. "Yes, Peg," she says, soft like. "I'm awful sure."

That shindig turned out to be a full house. Tired as he was, Rusty had rode over to the next ranch and got the boys and their wimmin folks and Tex come with a half dozen of his rannies. Lora was rigged up fit to kill as always but I didn't see Eve till I pushed into the room with my fiddle. Then I bumped square into her and had to swallow my Adam's Apple a couple of times before it would stay put.

She grabbed me and made me stay hitched. "How do I look, Peg?"

Before I had time to corral my tongue I told her. "You look like hell."

And she did. Lora had rigged her up in a long thing as black as mourning crepe, with her naked arms and back sticking out indecent. And with a sort of striped effect, for Eve's arms below the elbows was so brown they made the white parts look whiter. And that long skirt was all bunched up in the back into a bump like a camel's back and trailed down on the floor behind like a fancy mop. She looked mighty elegant, I'll grant you that. But not a bit like Eve.

She wouldn't let me off easy. "I feel like hell, too, Peg. But I do look like a woman, don't I?"

Maybe I ought to've been kicked but I told the truth. "Yeah," I says. "Like one of them kind of wimmin a feller thinks looks mighty snazzy after he's

killed a couple of bottles."

Eve flounced off and I went on to start the dancing. But fiddling not being much of a job for me I was able to see everything and I soon saw Eve was having trouble with that dress tail. About every other turn she'd get her feet tangled up and start lunging like a hobbled horse. Half the time when the caller was yelling to lead to the right Eve was pulling left on account of that skirt being wrapped so tight about her legs she was plum dizzy trying to get herself unhobbled. And all the time Lora was tripping do-see-do as cool as a cucumber, holding up her skirts in a ladylike way.

Sweat started pouring off Eve and she began motioning me to stop the music. Stead of that, I just struck up a faster tune and Eve tripped and would have fell if Tex hadn't held her up. She glared my way like her trigger finger was itching and I yelled to the caller to whoop her up faster. We swung into Turkey in the Straw and I knowed Eve couldn't make it. She was lunging about like a steer on the end of a reata and all the boys was splitting their sides watching her. And she knowed it, too. But she was game and stuck to the saddle.

About when I was almost ready to get sorry for her somebody jostled a table and knocked a vase off. It fell close by Eve with a bang and quick as a flash she saw her way out. She give a little screech and fainted dead away, right square in Tex's arms. Not even Lora could have done it better.

TEX picked her up gentle like and laid her on the sofa. "Somebody bring water," he yelled, scared as hell. Rusty come running with a dipper full. Looking plum innocent like, he dumped it all square in Eve's face.

Sputtering and gasping, she come up like a steer on the prod. I knowed full well she was going to forget herself and start saying things no lady should. By then I was plum sorry for her and did what I could to help. I grabbed Rusty by the collar and shook him. "You spavined hoss thief," I yelled, "Don't you know that's no way to treat a lady?"

That brought Eve to her senses and she flopped back down. "I'm so sorry," she says to Tex. "But I thought sure that was a gun and guns scare me so. I just can't stand them."

Then she asked Tex if he wouldn't take her outside for some fresh air. "I ain't very strong, I guess," she sighs. "Dancing tires me so." Nobody laughed, even at that. The look on Tex Duncan's face said we'd better not.

It was along about three in the morning and we were still whooping it up when there was a commotion at the door. A rannie stood there, blood mixed with the dust on his face and one sleeve blood soaked. I remembered seeing him with Tex Duncan's outfit that afternoon and guessed he'd been left as night watch. Tex run over and grabbed him and yelled: "What happened, Joe? Talk, man!"

"Outlaws!" Joe gasped out. "They jumped us and got me and Johnny and stampeded the herd toward the border." Then the poor waddie collapsed and passed out.

As one man we started for the corral, stopping at the bunk house for gun belts and plenty of cartridges. We all knowed what was ahead. Every once in a while border outlaws got bold enough to stage a raid like that and once them longhorns was across the Injun Territory line a whole cavalry troop couldn't find or stop 'em. And they'd gather up Cold River beef on the way.

Before I got to the corral I heard Eve yelling, "Wait for me, Peg!" So I was

throwing leather on her big roan when she come running up, still cramming her shirt tail under them levis. Tex saw her and tried to stop her.

"You mustn't go, Eve," he tells her. "This is no job for a lady."

EVE give him a shove that almost unfooted him. "I'm not a lady," she snaps. "Out of my way, Tex. You think I'm going to sit here knitting while a bunch of goddam cow thieves ride my range?"

On that leggy roan of hers Eve could pass anything. And did that night. By the time we sighted the dust of that herd she was right in front and the first bullet was from her gun. I'd lay odds it wasn't wasted, either.

While half our bunch circled around to try to turn the herd, the rest of us, including me and Eve, started a running fight with the outlaws. There must have been a dozen of them, from the way lead whistled around our heads and the orange flares that blossomed on the range. Hemmed in between that milling herd and us they were fighting for their lives and knew it.

Close by me a horse squealed and went down. The rider landed cat-footed and I knew he was Tex by the height of him. Just ahead a gun flared and Tex didn't seem as tall as he was. His hat had sailed off. He didn't answer the shot and I knew he'd lost his gun in the fall. I saw the outlaw riding back to run him down and threw my gun on him and triggered. All I heard was an empty click and there wasn't time for reloading.

Just as I give Tex up a horse shot past me and I knew Eve's roan. She was yelling and shooting and her second shot brought that outlaw tumbling out of the saddle almost at her feet. Eve stopped just long enough to let Tex get up behind her, then tore off after the rest.

It was over soon after that and the herd headed back for the bedding grounds. When we took stock we found we'd killed three and captured four border bandits with a price on their heads. Not a bad night's work.

It was daylight when we straggled into the ranch yard. Lora, looking like a pretty, pale ghost, come a-running and threw herself at Tex. "O," she howled like a coyote, "I been so scairt! I just knew you'd be killed, Tex!"

I give Tex credit for some fast spur jingling. He had the horse between them before Lora knew he'd moved. And he was talking to Eve instead of Lora.

"I would have been killed if it hadn't been for you, Eve. It takes a mighty brave woman to do what you done tonight, shooting that outlaw down when you're so scared of guns."

Eve slid to the ground and looked square at him. "I'm not afraid of guns, Tex," she told him. "I can shoot and ride as good as any man. All that fainting tonight was just an act."

Tex was grinning, not looking mad at all. "I been knowing that quite a while, Eve," he says. "But why?"

Never one to beat about the bush, Eve gave it to him straight. "I was trying to be the kind of woman you like, Tex. But not any more. After this I'm going to be myself whether you ever speak to me again or not."

Tex had seemed to forget that anybody besides Eve was listening. Sounded like he was gargling axle grease again as he told her: "I reckon I wouldn't mind my woman being good at riding and shooting, Eve. Provided she was good at other kinds of things, too."

Eve sort of sidled closer. "What kind of things, Tex?"

"Thing's that's a woman's business," the old die-hard answers. "Like cook-

ing—and kissing."

Eve's old laugh bubbled over. "That's plum easy, Tex," she tells him, bold as brass. "Ling has taught me how to cook and you can start right now teaching me how to kiss."

Right then I decided to follow Lora to the house. But didn't I tell you Eve was no lady?

THE END

JIM BRIDGER'S WONDERS

★ By DAVID WESTON FAGGERT ★

JAMES BRIDGER, the celebrated hunter, trader, and guide whose name and career are now a part of the pioneer history of the West, was one of those fabulous characters who could blend wonders of nature with sly, slick, imagination. The stories he told, especially about the scientific wonders of Yellowstone Park, have been told many times since his day and have become more enjoyable with each telling.

The first is related to the well-known Obsidian Cliff, a mass of black volcanic glass with which all tourists in the park become familiar. Bridger discovered it on one of his hunting trips in this fashion:

Having been out all day without much luck, Bridger was returning to his camp late one afternoon when he spied a magnificent elk. He took aim and fired. To his great astonishment, the animal did not even move. Bridger quickly raised his gun again and after taking careful aim let go another shot. The elk was immovable. Cursing under his breath, Bridger now went quickly forward, took a position nearer the target, and let go a third shot. The elk still stood straight and unharmed. Bridger, becoming violently angry at what he thought was his faulty marksmanship, leaped forward intending to use the butt of his gun as a club. As he dashed angrily at the elk, he suddenly smashed headlong into an immovable vertical wall which proved to be a mountain of perfectly transparent glass. On the farther side, the elk stood peacefully grazing oblivious to what had occurred. This mountain, moreover, was not only of pure glass, but acted as a perfect telescopic lens, and the elk which was apparently only 75 yards distant was actually 25 miles away.

Then there was the Bridger discovery of an ice-cold stream near the summit of a mountain. It flowed down over a long smooth slope. Be cause of the friction of the water over the stones, it acquired such a tremendous velocity that it was boiling hot by the time it reached the bottom.

Of course Jim Bridger had his whimsical moments too. For example, to find the height above sea level of any place, he recommended boring down until salt water was reached, and then measure the distance.

It was Bridger's practical nature that produced so many marvelous innovations as far as the application of natural phenomena to everyday life was concerned. Opposite a certain camp site, for example, rose a bald, straight-sided mountain that came in mighty handy to Bridger. The side of this mountain was so far away that it took almost six hours for the echo of a shout or yell to return. To Bridger, this seemed a masterful arrangement for an excellent alarm clock. Each night just as he was going to bed he would call out in his lusty baritone, "It's time to get up now!" Each morning precisely on the hour the echo of the call would roll back and wake the sleeping Bridger to prepare him for the next day's travel.

Then there is the famous story that probably belongs to Emerson Hough but was somehow acquired by Bridger. It is concerned with the strange characteristics of Alum Creek, a tributary of the Yellowstone. According to Bridger, this peculiar creek came to his attention one day when he had ridden across it to some distance on the other side and then returned. He noted that the trip back was a great deal shorter than the trip out. Moreover, his horse's hoofs seemed to have shrunk to mere points and the poor animal was having extreme difficulty moving about for his feet were digging into the ground. Seeking a cause for this trouble, he examined the creek and found the astringent quality of the alum had the power to pucker distance itself.

This last yarn will undoubtedly call to mind certain experiences that many tourists have had at Yellowstone Lake. It is a common practice for fishermen who catch fish in the lake to cook them in the boiling pools without removing them from the line. Well, nearby there is an immense boiling spring that sends its overflow spilling into the lake. Since the specific gravity of this boiling water is somewhat less than that of the lake water because of the expansive action of heat, it floats upon the colder water underneath in a layer three or four feet deep. It is to this spot that Bridger would come when in a fish-eating mood. Dropping his line through the hot upper layer, he would let the bait fall to the cooler fish-laden water and, having hooked his victim, cooked him on the way out.

There was an editor in 1879 who was prepared to publish the stories of the Yellowstone wonders until a man who claimed to know Bridger told him he would be laughed out of town if he printed any of "old Jim Bridger's lies." In later years this editor publicly apologized to Bridger for having doubted his statements. We apologize too!

★ CLAN MURDER ★

DURING the 1870's the state of Texas was the most lawless spot on earth. The western part of the state was still frontier country, and the Apache and Comanche tribes were raiding the sparse settlements ruthlessly. Life was cheap, and the old slogan which Darwin coined, "survival of the fittest," was clearly demonstrated; he who was the best shot lived the longest.

Because conditions in the state were so unsettled, outlaws from all over the South poured into Texas. At that time cattle was identified by the owner's ranch brand, and several ranch herds grazed in the same territory. A man with a horse, a rope, and a branding iron could start his own herd (and often did!) by altering an established brand. Gunmen were employed by ranchers to protect and increase the size of their herds.

The cause of justice was fought for by a handful of fearless men. The U. S. marshal represented law and order in the town, although in some cases even he chose the opposite path. The marshal was selected on one basis—his skill with a gun. If he was feared by the community because of his accurate marksmanship, that was all the reference he needed to obtain the position.

One group, meager as it was, could always be depended on for quick, decisive action in an emergency, provided they happened to be in the vicinity. They were the Texas Rangers. It was due to the presence of the Rangers in the courtroom of Judge Pleasants in DeWitt County that he was able to state ". . . Without reviewing the long record of lawlessness, I shall tell you now that in Clinton and DeWitt Counties, those evil days are past."

This courtroom scene presented a very unusual picture. The Judge knew as he stood to make that statement that he might be reading his own death sentence. Three Rangers were stationed on each side of him with their guns cocked and their eyes roving carefully over the hostile audience there. No such convincing demonstration of law had ever before been seen in DeWitt County.

Six men were being tried; all six were murderers. The trial actually involved more than six men; it involved an entire community. DeWitt County was divided against itself and had been for some time. It was the center for at least a dozen family feuds which had originated in quarrels over cattle. On the whole, this group of six men would, under ordinary conditions, have been good citizens supporting law and order. But Texas was wild country. There was the question of adequate protection of personal and property rights which, by the way, was noticeably lacking. The times and the circumstances plus a false sense of honor, family pride, and loyalty, the call to clan unity, must all be considered in judging the participants of a feud, especially the Taylor-Sutton feud of Texas.

The most important cattle owners in DeWitt County were the Suttons and the Taylors. Their stock grazed over the same lands and an argument concerning ownership of several head of cattle began the trouble between them. Both families were large and had intermarried among several other large families in the neighborhood. As the battle progressed, all the relatives were drawn into the struggle until virtually the entire region was at war. Neutrals were few and far between, and through force or choice soon took sides.

Conditions steadily went from bad to worse. Everyone carried a gun, and armed gangs of Suttons and Taylors roamed the countryside looking for victims. Some groups "on the hunt" numbered as many as seventy-five men. Buck Taylor and Dick Chisholm were shot at a dance. Jack Helms, a former sheriff and U. S. marshal and now a member of the Sutton group, was shot in a pistol duel with John Wesley Hardin, the worst killer in Texas history, and an ally of the Taylors. These were the more notable encounters. In the records there are many cases of men being shot while going about their daily chores.

Three of the Taylor clan were arrested for cattle-rustling and taken by the sheriff to the Clinton County jail. Before the night was over, the Suttons stormed the jail and had them lynched.

The struggle soon assumed the appearance of a minor war. Both sides rallied for a battle in Clinton. The Suttons still had possession of the courthouse. Moving up from the river for the attack were the Taylors in full force and armed to the teeth.

All the peaceful citizens of the town sought cover. Stores were hurriedly closed, and the women and children were herded into houses in an effort to keep them out of the path of the bullets which were about to fly.

How this mighty avalanche of brute force and murderous intent was halted remains in the memories of those who looked on as almost a miracle! During one of the most tense moments, the virtual "calm before the storm" when the two mobs of men full of hate were taking the last few strides toward each other, that miraculous event occurred.

One upright citizen was brave enough to try and put a stop to the slaughter which was threatening. That man was Judge Pleasants.

Into the open space between the two forces, he walked. He was alone except for the shotgun he held. He stood there facing first one party and then the other, and then delivered a one-man ultimatum.

"There will be no fighting here," he announced in a clear, ringing voice. "I mean to see that peace comes to this county. Go home, and stop this mad business."

Both sides were taken by surprise. Judge Pleasants was a man of character and influence. He had been trying to rally the citizens of the county

to neutrality and its officers to enforce the law against the feudists. He was looked on with suspicion by the firebrands of both sides, but these wild fighting men knew bravery when they saw it. While they hesitated, a few of the leading women of the town walked across the courthouse square and joined the judge. That ended the battle of Clinton before it started. The clans slipped out of town by different roads.

From all outward appearances, the feud was over; but in spite of what had occurred in Clinton it ran on for years. Assassinations continued. No man felt safe from an unusupected bullet. The feud ran on until no Taylor or Sutton man remained to lead the gunmen.

All the efforts that Judge Pleasants had made to try to end the long years of terror in Clinton and DeWitt Counties had failed. His appeals to good citizens and local peace officers had brought no end to the killings. Witnesses were afraid to testify at trials. Those who had been brave enough to offer to give evidence as to the true identity of the killers in some of the local murders were "put out of the way" before they were scheduled to appear. There was only one method of ending these wanton murders. Judge Pleasants wrote to the Governor requesting that a company of Texas Rangers be sent to DeWitt County.

When the Rangers arrived, their leader, Lieutenant Lee Hall, and Judge Pleasants met to discuss the best tactics to employ in rounding up the killers.

Several weeks previous to the entrance of the Rangers upon the scene the death of Dr. Brazell had caused a great deal of excitement in the community. He had been one of the few men who did not take part in the battle. However, he had lent his talents to the fray by caring for the sick and wounded of both sides during the seven-year feud. One night when he lay very ill at his farmhouse, a group of men came and dragged him from his bed in the presence of his wife. The doctor and his three sons were taken into the woods. The two younger boys managed to escape. Their father and older brother were shot to death. No motive for the crime can be given other than the fear that the doctor, about to die, might reveal to the authorities something he had learned while attending some of the feudists.

The Judge and the dashing young lieutenant set out to gather what evidence they could against the Brazell murderers. It was agreed that Hall should arrest the guilty ones and the Judge should see that justice was done in the courts. A grand jury was called, and indictments found against seven men.

One of the accused was Joe Sitterlie. Oblivious to what was being conspired in the court, Sitterlie was about to be married and a dance was given in the home of the bride to celebrate the event. Hall decided to be an uninvited guest. Twenty-five fighting men accompanied him armed with Winchesters and revolvers. When the Rangers arrived the young couple had been married and the festivities were in full swing. The Rangers surrounded the house as Lieutenant Hall mounted the steps.

William Meador, marshal of a town in the vicinity and also one of the seven wanted for the Brazell killings, met Hall as he neared the open doorway. The marshal told Hall that his men didn't have a chance because there were more than fifty men inside ready to fight. His warning was ignored as Hall pushed his way into the house.

The young lieutenant was met by a tumult of shouts and threats. He waited until it died down before he spoke. Calmly he stated that the house was surrounded and that seven men were wanted. Cries went up from the group. They said they would rather fight it out. Then they demanded that the firing be held until the women and children could be moved out.

Suddenly the killers changed their minds. They could not oppose the Rangers, for in reality they would be opposing the true representatives of the U. S. government—and somehow they could not bring themselves to the outright killing of twenty-five men. Hall's demand that Meador turn over his gun was met by hesitant obedience. Hall called in two of his men to collect weapons. All the wedding guests were disarmed.

In answer to the bride's plea, the dancing was resumed. Some of the troopers took part in the festivities while the rest of the Rangers patrolled outside. When the festivities were over the Rangers took their prisoners to Clinton, but not until Hall had warned those he left behind that if any attempt to rescue the prisoners was made, his men had orders to kill them first.

The trial was watched carefully by all the inhabitants of that area and men rode in from far and wide to hear the final results. Both the Taylor and Sutton factions attended the proceedings. Judge Pleasant's life was in danger, and speculators were making wagers on the probable day of his death.

Finally the morning came when the Judge was to make his decision. As he rose to speak, six Rangers walked down the aisle and took their places on each side of him. They threw cartridges into the breeches of their guns and cocked their weapons so they could fire without a second's delay if necessary.

The Judge's eyes fell on the lines of hostile embittered feudsmen seated before him. His words were cold, and their meaning was clearly understood by all. He accused the entire courtroom audience of partaking in murder; he assailed the very poor record of the community in the eyes of the nation; and proclaimed that those lawless days were now over. The gray-haired old judge's eyes flashed and his voice rang out as he spoke. His words were true—for with the force exhibited by the Rangers and the unparalleled courageousness of Judge Pleasants, the feuding element quieted down and returned to peaceful occupations. The Brazell killers were imprisoned for life.

In DeWitt and Clinton Counties, everyone could now truthfully repeat the words of Judge Pleasants, "Those evil days are past." *Gale Stevens.*

WESTERN WILLIAM TELL

By HERBERT WOODNIGH

The Western way to shoot things off your head!

OUT of the early newspapers of the old West (the *Missouri Intelligencer* for one) can be gleaned the story of one Westerner whose picturesque qualities defy any character of fiction. Mike Fink—blustering, boastful, gun-totin' Mike Fink lived and laughed in the 1820's. His antics appear to be the products of an imaginative writer's flowing pen rather than a series of real-life occurrences. Mike Fink was real enough; he carved a path a yard wide in the memories of early Westerners. He was recognized by one and all as an expert shot, a teller of jokes which had to be laughed at, and a ruthless sense of humor. His manners were coarse, his voice was loud, and if he were taller he would have passed for Hercules. All one hundred and eighty pounds of him were muscle; the skin of his face was well tanned and leathery, a treatment he received free of charge from the sun and rain. His square brawny form was well-proportioned and spread out admirably over his five feet nine inch frame. Because of his expert marksmanship and lack of hesitancy when it came to lead-slinging, Fink was feared by friend and foe alike.

His conventional schooling was replaced by a river education. When just a boy the life on the river fascinated him, and he longed to become a boatman. River transportation was important, so important in the days of western expansion that it is probable our country could not have been populated in those times without it. Quickly and cheaply goods, men, and supplies were moved into the West. Wagon trains were supplied with essential food and tools in towns situated on the river. Farmers shipped cattle, grain, and household belongings along the waterways of the West when the railroad was yet a myth.

The sound of a boat horn was music to Mike Fink's ears, and he learned to imitate its notes. As soon as he grew old enough, he began to work on the river. The life suited his tastes; it satisfied a good part of his craving for adventure with its glimpses of strange places.

A native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Fink spent most of his time there when the water was too low for navigation. That community offered its own intriguing pastimes. The frequent Saturday shooting matches almost always included Mike Fink among the participants; more often than not, he emerged a winner. The prizes were always quarters of beef, and Fink made off with so many of them that he became known as the best shot in the country. His extraordinary skill excluded him, finally, from further participation in the matches. As a price for this exclusion, he was always allowed to have the "fifth quarter" of the beef, which consisted of the hide and tallow. But Mike was a drinkin' man, and neither the hide nor the tallow remained in his hands for very long.

With these items in hand, he was often seen wending his way toward any conveniently located bar. He traded his "winnings" for whisky, treated everyone in sight, and made a particular point of treating himself. Although fond of strong drink, he was never known to be drunk. In twenty-four hours he could put away an entire gallon and not show any ill effects.

In the bar-room, on the street, everywhere he went, Fink was always surrounded by friends—or men who appeared to be friends. Their laughter and the broad smiles upon their faces were not always spontaneous. Although Mike was known as a wit, his jokes evoked the feeling of fear as well as amusement among his fellow boatmen. He challenged anyone who refused to laugh at his jokes. He used to say that he told his jokes to be laughed at and that no one should make light of them.

Two of Mike's closest friends were Carpenter and Talbot. Both were handy with their guns and each of the three was a match for the other in fighting and in markmanship. They encouraged each other in their skill. On his return from what might have been an uneventful journey up the Mississippi, Fink had a story to tell his two pals.

It seemed the whole trip had been so boring that Mike had been forced to amuse himself by taking "pot shots" at limbs of trees, crows, anything which caught his fancy. On the shore on one occasion he saw a sow with eight or nine pigs peacefully poised on the river bank. Without a qualm he raised his rifle and, as the boat glided up the river forty or fifty yards from shore, he shot at one pig after another. Being a humane fellow, he had cut their tails off close to their bodies!

That is not the only story which can be told of the foolhardy exploits of Mike Fink's trigger finger. In 1821, while standing on the levee in St. Louis, he saw a worker seated on the river bank listlessly gazing at what was going on around him. The fellow's foot caught Mike's eye. It had a very unusual shape; the heel protruded to the rear so far that there seemed to be almost as much foot extending behind his ankle as in front of it. This unshapely form offended Mike's eye and outraged his sense of symmetry. He determined to correct it. Lifting his rifle at thirty

paces, he actually shot the heel away, inflicting an ugly wound. The victim dropped to the ground screaming "Murder!" Mike was indicted in the Circuit court of the county, tried and found guilty. His plea in justification of the offense was that he wanted to fix the man's foot so that he could wear the same kind of boots everyone else wore. The punishment must not have been very severe, for in the spring of 1822 Mike Fink was at liberty—and whooping things up as usual.

Mike's closest pal, Carpenter, was also a crack shot. It was a common thing for Carpenter and Fink to fill a tin cup with whisky and shoot it from each other's heads at a distance of seventy yards. The feat was always performed successfully; the fellow supporting the cup always escaped without a scratch, and the same cup never could hold whiskey again. This performance served as an avowal of their confidence in one another and their strong regard for each other.

Talbot, Carpenter, and Fink saw the opportunity for advetnure in the exploration of virgin territory. All three were eager to take part in the venture which was being organized in 1822 by General Ashley and Major Henry. An attempt was being made to organize a company of men to open up trade with the mountain tribes of the far West. The three men enlisted as boatmen, hunters, and trappers. They were all interested and enthused about their new job and were eager to be on their way.

As far as possible, the newly organized group penetrated the West by following the river route. At the mouth of the Yellowstone River a fort was constructed, and small parties of men were sent out from there to trap. Mike and his two friends with nine others set out together. On the Muscelshell River they made their winter camp.

During the long cold months of comparative inactivity, the men were prone to quarrel among themselves. A deadly argument arose between Mike and Carpenter over an Indian squaw, and only through the intervention of several men were these two kept from each other's throats. With the arrival of spring, the party revisited the fort. Here, over their liquor, the quarrel was resumed. Again they shook hands and decided to call off the argument. Mike Fink proposed that they testify to their friendship and loyalty by performing their favorite trick once more together. Shoot a cup of whiskey from each other's head would not only be a test of reconciliation, but of mutual trust and confidence as well.

Both of them inwardly knew that it was to be "curtains" for the first man to hold the cup. The most important question of the moment was to decide who was to have the privilege of the first shot. To determine this, Mike proposed to "sky a copper"—or, as we would say, flip a coin. This was done and Mike won the first shot. Carpenter knew from long experience the uncompromising character of Mike's hatred and was sure that he would be killed. But a compact was a compact, and he was prepared to take the consequences. To Talbot he bequeathed all his worldly possessions which included his rifle and wages, and then he went out to the place where he was to meet Fink.

When he arrived, Mike was loading his rifle and picking his flint. Carpenter, without a word, filled his cup with whiskey and placed it on his head. He took his place and to all outward appearances was calm and serene; not even an eyelash flickered to betray the mad thoughts which were racing through his brain at that moment. Mike leveled his rifle at a distance of sixty yards. After drawing a bead he took down his rifle and smilingly said: "Hold your noddle steady, Carpenter, and don't spill the whiskey, as I shall want some presently." He again raised his rifle and in an instant Carpenter fell, dying without a groan. The bullet had penetrated his forehead in the center an inch and a half above the eyes. Mike coolly set the breech of his gun on the ground, and applying his mouth to the muzzle, blew the smoke out of the barrel, all the while keeping his eye upon the prostrate form of his old-time friend. Finally he said: "Carpenter, you have spilled the whiskey!" When told that Carpenter was dead, he tried to clear himself. "It is all a mistake," he said, "for I took as fine a bead on the black spot on the cup as I ever took on a squirrel's eye. How did it happen?" He then cursed his rifle, his bullet, and finally his own apparent lack of skill.

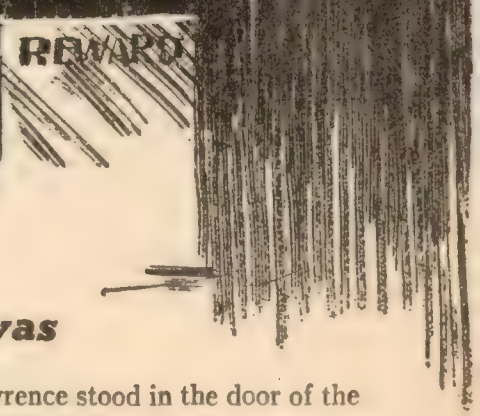
The crime was allowed to pass off as an accident, and Mike was never deprived of his freedom to come and go as he pleased. But Talbot, who was Carpenter's friend, was convinced of Mike's treacherous intent. Some months afterwards, Mike declared that he had killed Carpenter on purpose and was glad of it. Talbot, to avenge his dead pal, instantly drew his pistol and shot Mike through the heart.

Talbot was never brought to trial for no one had the authority to administer the law. The West was really wild in those days, and the only law that was understood was Darwin's "survival of the fittest." If there was any righteous citizen abroad who desired to avenge the death of murderous Mike Fink, he never made himself known. Mike's only legacy to the West that passed him by was his peculiar sense of humor and his sardonic laugh.

BUY VICTORY BONDS

THE MAN WHO TAMED TOMBSTONE

by LES SAVAGE, Jr.



All Tombstone feared the gun-slingin' Kid, but no one knew who he was

HE WAS probably the only man in Tombstone who hadn't run to see Kaye Lawrence arrive. He stood alone in the door of the Crystal Palace Saloon on the corner of Fifth and Allen. He seemed interested only in the deck of cards he shuffled through his thick fingers.

In Bisbee, they had told me of Odds Argyle who ran the Crystal Palace, and I wondered if this could be him. Then, still standing in the door of the Tombstone-Bisbee stage, I looked on over the shifting heads of the crowd to where the Dragoons thrust their purple crags out of the desert east from town, and I forgot Odds Argyle, and nostalgia cut me like a knife.

"Git down, greenhorn, and give us a gander at the lady."

The rest of the mob began shouting, and as soon as I jumped down, I felt the savage, unbridled violence of them, jamming me up against the coach, and I had trouble controling the sudden desire to elbow them away from me. Eddie Hammer, I told myself, take it easy. Kaye Lawrence stood in the door of the coach now, and the men had forgotten me. Her dark hair was done up in a lustrous pile beneath the chic pink of her Parisian hat, and the green velour gown shimmered across the rich curve of her bosom. In all the rising dust and heat, I wondered how she could look so cool and regal, her red lips glistening a little over the shadowed line of gleaming white teeth her smile revealed. A last man clattered around the corner of Fifth and Fremont, calling to someone.

"What's up, Al, what's the ruckus?"

"It's the opery singer come to preform at the Bird Cage," answered a bearded miner. "She's purtier than Lily Langtry."

I was jostled by a tall man in a black fustian and pin striped trousers who pushed up to the battered Concord, bowing to Kaye like a courtier. "You seem to be without an escort, ma'am. May I assist you out of that atrocity Wells and Fargo have the temerity to call a stage coach."

"The lady has an escort," I said, and

He was probably the only man in Tombstone who didn't run to see Kaye Lawrence arrive

could see how drunk he was.

He didn't seem to hear me. "Allow me to introduce myself, Miss Lawrence. Rhodes. Doc Rhodes. Your slave, Miss Lawrence."

I could begin to feel the restless shift around me, and I knew that sign in a crowd. "The greenhorn'll take care of the lady, Doc," one of them called sarcastically. "Didn't you hear?"

I tried to elbow Doc Rhodes aside and hold up my hand to Kaye. "Gentlemen, will you please make room for Miss Lawrence?"

They pushed in around me closer, and Doc Rhodes reached up and pulled my arm down, and one of the mob shouted, "Ain't she a looker, and take a gander at that hat," and someone began singing a ribald ditty about Maisie's hat down on Allen Street, which, I gathered, was Tombstone's bawdy district. As Kaye's business manager, most of my job was handling the public, and I knew what a mistake it would be to let myself go with this crowd in such a mood.

"Let go my arm," I told Doc Rhodes, trying to keep my voice even. "Will you please step back for the lady?"

"Let go the greenhorn's arm, Doc," mocked the bearded miner.

'She ain't no lady," someone else shouted, "she's an actress."

MAYBE that did it. Or maybe Doc Rhodes tugging on my arm. I whirled suddenly and jammed my free forearm across his throat and shoved him against the crowd. They spread away from me; but Doc tripped on a cowhand's boots and fell on back into the miner and the miner staggered back and tripped across the high curb, and they both fell into the dusty street.

With the crowd laughing and roaring around him, Doc Rhodes got up with the solemn dignity of the inebriate, brushing his black satin lapels carefully with a long pale hand. Then he turned to me and I saw his eyes clearly for the first time. They were big and bloodshot behind heavy dissipated lids, and strangely soft. The men had stopped laughing suddenly, and in the silence, Doc Rhode's voice was as soft as his eyes and as deadly.

"Nobody knocks me down like that," he said, "drunk or sober. Would you care to apologize?"

"Not particularly," I said.

"Oh, God," called the miner, and the crowd spread with a sudden clatter of boots against the sidewalk, backing into doorways and out into the street, and Doc Rhodes and I were standing alone there facing each other.

"Then I consider that you have insulted me," said Rhodes, "and I demand satisfaction," and he stepped out from the curb and slapped me in the face.

For just that moment I stood there with the sharp sting of his white palm on my cheek. Then, my own rage blinding me to anything else, I took a jerky step backward and grabbed beneath the left lapel of my steel pen coat.

"Hammer!"

It was Kaye's voice, cutting through my heat, cold and clear, and it stopped me and held me there with my hand gripping the spur trigger on the Remington-Rider in my shoulder harness. Doc Rhodes long legs had bent into the kind of a crouch I knew well enough, and his hand was stiff above the black rubber grip of the Colt beneath his fustian. Slowly, I straightened, trembling a little with the effort it took to control myself now.

"You're drunk," I said. "Come back some time when you're sober," and didn't pull my hand free until I had turned clear around to help Kaye down.

She was soft on my arm, dragging it

down a little deliberately with her weight, muttering in my ear. "Take it easy, Hammer. What's the matter with you? We've done a hundred towns and you've never let it get you like this. Tombstone's no different. A little wilder, maybe. No different."

Doc Rhodes hadn't moved from between us and the curb, and his elbow still held the tail of his coat off the Colt's black butt. "Does the lady usually pull her skirts out for you to hide behind this way?"

"You're in our way," I said carefully.

He swayed slightly with his liquor. "We haven't finished yet."

"I told you to come around when you're sober," I said. "I don't fight with drunks."

Rhodes flushed and started to say something, but Kaye turned one of her smiles up at him. "Please, Mr. Rhodes. Have you so lost all your gentlemanly instincts as to carry on a common brawl in the street with a lady present?"

Perhaps it was the musical caress Kaye could put into her voice, or perhaps it was her stunning beauty. I had seen it affect men that way so many times before. The palpable tension left Doc Rhode's long body, and his face relaxed suddenly, and he was staring at her like a schoolboy with a crush. Suddenly he stepped back and bowed so deeply he almost fell on his face, and though he was under her spell, his voice still seemed faintly mocking.

"Truly, ma'am, I forgot myself. You are right. No gentleman would comport himself so abominably in the presence of a lady. My deepest apologies ——" But as we stepped onto the walk and moved by him, he straightened, and though he was still speaking to her, he was looking at me, with that soft deadliness back in his bloodshot eyes—"but you can tell your Mr. Hammer that I will most certainly be around when I'm sober, I will be around very soon, when I'm sober."

GARRISON WHITEHALL owned the Cosmopolitan Hotel, as well as the Bird Cage Theater where we were booked. He was a small bustling little man whose paunch filled his bed-of-flowers waistcoat the way a successful business man's should, and whose toupee kept slipping back on his fat pate.

"I hope you'll find everything to your satisfaction, Mr. Hammer. Sorry about what happened in the street, really sorry. Too bad you had to antagonize Doc Rhodes like that. He's probably the deadliest man in Tombstone. Drunk and gambling all the time and never paying his bills, but one of the deadliest"—he waved his hand without bothering to connect his subjects—"and one thing I'm reluctant to broach. I said I'd have your full fee as soon as you arrived, but you see, the Chiricahua Kid——"

"The Chiricahua Kid?"

Maybe it was the sharpness of my voice that drew his eyebrows up in that surprise. "Yes. A broncho Apache. Uses red arrows. Murderer, bandit. Very bad. He disappeared from around here about fifteen years ago but he's come back just recently. And as I was saying, because of this Chiricahua Kid's activities, Tombstone has been veritably isolated from the rest of Cochise County, stage schedules all upset, telegraph wires cut, people afraid to come in or go out. And now the banker's agent from Bisbee is two days late, which creates an unfortunate situation. In the early days, the companies used to pay their miners at the source, with dust directly from the mine; but now they pay by check and you can understand what a drain the weekly draw of

some twenty-five hundred miners would have on the bank. This is only a branch of Gibson's National here, and whenever there is an unusually heavy Saturday run, like last week, they depend on the banker's agent to supplement the drain with specie and coin from Bisbee."

"Yes?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "And now, as I say, the agent hasn't arrived yet, and Gibson's is unable to meet the Saturday pay checks. You couldn't find this situation in any other town on the face of the earth, but here, where everything's crazy anyway—" he made that gesture with his hand—"in a mining center, mind you, the saloons and other places of entertainment depend mainly on the miners for their business. Now, with the miners temporarily insolvent, as it were, we'll have to extend them credit until we either get word from the company officials in Bisbee authorizing the paymasters to issue dust here, or until the banker's agent arrives. Naturally I was depending on the receipts of the Bird Cage to fill out the fee I agreed to pay you, but the only receipts I'll be getting now are chits, until the banker's agent——"

"All right," I said. "All right. Everything's fine, Mr. Whitehall. We'll trust you until they do whatever's necessary to pay the miners. Now, it's been a hard trip and Miss Lawrence will need to rest before curtain time."

"I understand," he said, backing toward the door. "Believe me. And I'm sorry about Doc Rhodes, I really am. The deadliest man in Tombstone. Yes. The deadliest man."

I WAS still trembling a little with what had happened in the street, and I didn't know whether it was the anger yet in me or the reaction. I turned to the long mirror set in the door of the bedroom, straightening my black string tie until I could find more control. The glass reflected the dark acquilinity of my face with its high cheekbones and broad facile mouth, a little twisted now, and black hair straight and thick as a horse's mane. I wasn't a tall man, but the shoulders of my steel pen weren't padded, and still the tailor had to cut them back wider than usual.

The room was done in a singularly atrocious Queen Anne, with buttoned plush of a sickening green hue for wall coverings, and brilliant-striped damask upholstering on the gilded sofa and Turkish ottoman. Reflected in the mirror, I could see Kaye's wry face as she looked around. She caught me watching her and laughed.

"When I settle down for good, Eddie Hammer," she said, "I'm going to have every room of my house done in Sheraton, with plain plaster walls."

I walked to the window without looking at her again, shoving aside the heavy Oriental portieres to look down on Fifth Street. Kaye moved in beside me, dropping the pretense suddenly.

"Thank you, Hammer," she said.

"I did it for you," I said. "I wouldn't have done it for anyone else."

"I know," she said. "And I don't think another man would have done it at all. It always takes more courage to back down than to go on, when you really want to go on. But Rhodes *was* drunk, Hammer, and there isn't any honor in meeting a drunk that way. I never saw you let it get out of hand before. Always the suave easy sophisticated Eddie Hammer, so completely the master of the situation that no one ever gets a chance to call your hand. What happened this time, Hammer? How did you let it get so far?"

I didn't answer; my glance was

turned down Fifth toward the Dragoons. She reached up a cool forefinger and ran it down the hard line of my jaw, turning my face toward her until I had to meet her eyes, big and luminous and dark, and somehow fearful.

"Is this it, Hammer?" she asked huskily.

"Is this what?"

"You looked at those Dragoon Mountains the same way when you got off the coach," she said. "I saw your face. Why, Hammer? You've been restless ever since we crossed the frontier. More than restlessness. A change. And now, down in the street, Hammer. I've never seen you show so much anger. The way you jumped back. Almost savage. I didn't think you were capable of that. I've seen you handle men so many times before; you've always been able to cope with whatever came up. But never like that. Never letting yourself go like that."

"He slapped my face," I said.

"No," she said and made me look at her again. "Something more, Hammer. Something that has to do with this change. I've always felt I didn't know you completely. You've been with me five years, Hammer; you've been my manager, my nursemaid, my confidant, my friend, always there, always responding to my moods so perfectly, yet I felt I never quite knew you. And I have a right to know you, Hammer. You kid around and play the game and never commit yourself, and I don't know how you feel about me, really. But you know how I feel about you and I have a right to know. What is it, Hammer?"

I PATTED her shoulder. "I think maybe it's the heat. You take a nap and you'll feel better this evening. I'll have the maid bring up a pitcher of milk and you take a big glass and have a nap."

Her eyes narrowed speculatively. "Is this it, Hammer?"

"You said that before. Is this what?"

"Tombstone," she said. "You never told we where you came from. You just showed up in New York playing marvelous piano at Timmie's Grille and you made me a business proposition and we've gone to the top on it and that's about all I know. Where's your family? Where do you come from? I saw the way you looked at the Dragoon Mountains. Is this it?"

I chuckled. "Who would want this squalid little hamlet for his home town? Anyway, how could it be? Tombstone wasn't founded till around 1879, the same year I was meeting you in Timmie's Grille. Now you have that nap, and I'll see you about seven for dinner.

I left Kaye with a strained look on her face and went down the hall to my suite. Always kidding around and playing the game and never committing myself? Sure, that's me, I thought bitterly, that's Eddie Hammer. A hundred times I'd wanted to tell her how I really felt about her, a million. But always there was that barrier between us. She had thought it was my natural reserve, and had tried to break through without knowing what she fought. But what good would it have done her to know, what good would it do for me to tell her? None. It would be the beginning of the end between us, that's all. She had sensed it from the first, as she said, and now, down in the street today, without recognizing it for what it was, she had seen it——

I stopped with my hand on the gilt knob of my door, one step into the parlor. He sat deep in the wing chair by the ornate fireplace and his heavy fingers shouldn't have been so deft with the deck of cards he shuffled constantly. He was the man who had

stood incuriously in front of the Crystal Palace when every other male in Tombstone was breaking his neck to see Kaye Lawrence.

"Odds Argyle?" I said.

He sat motionless except for his hands, not answering for a moment, still watching the cards he played with. His tremendous torso was foreshortened in the chair, and the development of his shoulders precluded any neck, his close-cropped bullet head rising directly from the gorilla slope of his upper back. His lips were thick with the mixed blood in him; mulatto, maybe, or creole, or half-breed. His voice rustled through the room like the whisper of a woman's skirt.

"Yes," he said softly. "And you, I take it, are Mr. Edward Hammer, Miss Lawrence's business manager. Italian?"

"I'm often taken for a foreigner," I told him.

"You're dark enough," he said. "Sit down, Nogales. Does Mr. Hammer make you nervous?"

HE WAS speaking to the black-haired Papago Indian with a dragging leg who had been moving incessantly about the room touching things with feathery fingers. Nogales didn't sit down; he didn't look at me either. But for a moment he was turned so I could see how he carried his big Remington six-gun stuck naked through his belt in the middle of his stomach.

"Funny," said Odds Argyle, still watching his cards. "Funny. You wouldn't expect these miners and cowhands to go for the high brow entertainment. Dance-hall stuff and the girls down at Maisie's and a tin-can piano maybe, but not opera singers and concert stars."

"You make a mistake if you think they don't go for it," I said. "We've been on tour six months and I've yet to see a house with an empty seat in it."

"No," said Odds Argyle, and a king appeared briefly in his fingers and disappeared, "No, I don't make a mistake. I know what a pull you city slickers have. Sit down, Nogales."

Nogales went on moving about the chamber, noiseless, in dirty bare feet, touching a Wedgewood vase on the mantel, passing his hand softly over the gleaming damask on the sofa back. Odds Argyle's cards kept up their constant fluttering sound. Neither of the men had looked at me yet and it was getting on my nerves.

"If you were wanting to meet Miss Lawrence," I said, "you'll have to wait till after the show tonight."

"If I had wanted to meet Miss Lawrence, I wouldn't have come to you," said Odds. "You're the business manager? Let's do business. How much would it cost, say, for your singer to get laryngitis, necessitating that you cancel your booking here?"

"That would mean forfeiting Whitehall's fee," I said.

"Of course," he said. "But say, if Miss Lawrence got sick, say you would get as much as Whitehall wanted, plus five thousand dollars. That's good odds. Sit down, Nogales."

"There are professional ethics involved here," I said, "which I have never sullied before. I think you've made a wrong bid."

"Or a low bid?" he said. "An ace of spades slipped through his thick fingers. "Seven thousand five hundred?"

"You must have a pretty expensive reason to want Miss Lawrence out of town," I told him.

"Never mind the reason," he said. "Ten thousand?"

"It's getting toward suppertime," I

said. "The first evening is usually a difficult one. I'd like to rest before the show."

"You force me to point out, Mr. Hammer, that there are other considerations," said Odds Argyle. "Yes. I am never a man to make threats. I don't have to. But if the money doesn't touch a responsive chord in you, then there are other considerations."

"Tell Nogales not to move any farther down the wall," I said.

Odds Argyle's chuckle was sibilant. "Oh, Mr. Hammer, you do me an injustice. I see you understand the other considerations; but not in a hotel room, please. So many people saw me come up; so many will see me leave. No, most certainly not in a hotel room. Sit down, Nogales."

"In the street, then?"

HE HADN'T looked at me yet and he shrugged his tremendous shoulders. "You sound so specific. But we might as well use it for an example. Yes. The street, then. An amateur would deem it the obvious, dangerous, crude place. But really it's the safest, the subtlest. One has a hundred witnesses that it was purely self-defense: and there are always methods to make it look that way, you know. There are more murderers walking around free today who did it that way than the ones who used a back alley. Or a hotel room."

"Doc Rhodes your man?" I asked.

"He frequents my establishment," smiled Odds, and his cards made a fluttering sound.

"That was your deal then?" I said. "Before you wasted your money, you thought you'd try it that way."

"Whatever Rhodes did out in the street was his own affair," said Odds. Then he slapped his cards together into their deck, and holding them with both hands, looked up. I had been waiting for it, but still couldn't hide the shock of meeting his eyes. They were intensely, bitterly black and filled with a strange feline glow and it struck me that Garrison Whitehall made a mistake tabbing Doc Rhodes as the most dangerous man in Tombstone. Then I became aware that Nogales had at last looked at me too, and I felt myself stiffening imperceptibly against the door. "However, Mr. Hammer," said Argyle, "as I mentioned before, I don't have to make threats. I see you realize what I'm driving at. There is a lady involved, and this is the wildest town west of the Missouri and almost anything can happen, any time. Won't you reconsider? Won't you reconsider for ten thousand dollars, plus Whitehall's original ante? That's good odds. Nobody would give you better."

"It's getting toward suppertime," I said.

Argyle's cards made a soft, fluttering sound in his hands. Nogales shifted his bare feet again the carpet. In that moment I could hear their breathing.

Then Odds Argyle rose without apparent effort and stood there, shorter than me by a head, probably twice as broad across the shoulders, flat-footed and spread-legged and perfectly balanced like a cat, waiting for Nogales to go out the door ahead of him. He stopped in front of me a moment, following the Papago, and studied his cards intently when he spoke.

"As I said," Odds murmured, not looking at me, "I don't have to make any threats. This is the wildest town west of the Missouri and almost anything can happen, any time."

CHAPTER II

THE Bird Cage Theater was a long adobe building on the southwest

corner of Sixth and Allen, its trio of fan lighted doors topped by Romanesque arches of brick. Whitehall and Kaye and I stood in the wings of the small stage that evening, watching the shouting crowd of miners and cowhands fill the auditorium. It wasn't a large house and couldn't begin to accommodate all of Tombstone's miners, but the night shift was below ground now and there were enough seats to draw most of the trade away from the saloons on Allen Street.

There were seven boxes on each side of the auditorium, the first one on either side low enough to be level with the stage. The door of the near box on the right side was thrust open and a man wearing the marshal's star on his short gray coat came in and took a rickety chair. The overhead lights cast his square face into deep shadow from which his blue eyes gleamed as cold and humorless as the muzzles of the twin six-shooters poking the black toes of their holsters from beneath his coat. Whitehall nodded greeting to him, muttering to me.

"Marshal George Graham. Shows you how things stand in town. Ever since Tombstone was founded, almost, the city marshal and the county sheriff have been on opposite sides of the fence. Marshal Graham's crowd always sits in the boxes on this side, Sheriff Nevis and his bunch take the ones on the other side. Whatever Graham's faction applauds, Nevis's men immediately boo."

"That would seem to put the performers in a spot," observed Kaye.

Whitehall nodded, looking quickly to the other side. "There comes Sheriff Nevis now."

Sheriff Nevis was a man whose belly undoubtedly kept him too far away from the bar to get his foot on the rail and whose guns had too much silver plating on them and whose posterior overflowed the rickety seat into which he lowered it. Only one man followed him into the box. With most of the others in coats, he wore a blue serge vest, wrinkled up around his neck by the strain his great shoulders put on it. He sat down without looking at the stage, shuffling a deck of cards. Odds Argyle.

The boxes behind Nevis filled up with his deputies and cowhands; and the miners and townsmen sitting around the small tables on the main floor began to beat their beer mugs on the planks and stamp their feet. Someone threw an empty bottle and broke one of the oil footlights. Marshal Graham stood up, cold blue eyes frowning on the shouting stamping crowd. Sheriff Nevis stood up, his paunch overflowing the gilt railing.

"Bring out the gal," shouted someone. "Let's see the show."

"Sit down, Marshal, and let the boys have their fun," yelled Nevis. "Ain't every night they git to see a woman like this."

Marshal Graham's voice was chilly. "Sit down yourself, Nevis. Long as I wear the marshal's badge in this town, nobody throws bottles at a lady. Next man that does it gets thrown out."

Sheriff Nevis' crowd began to stamp and boo, and the men on the main floor added their catcalls and stamping to the din. Whitehall said something from the wings that was lost in the sound.

"*Goodbye Dolly Gray,*" I told Kaye, giving her a loud one, "and hit it!"

IT WAS an old square grand, and I struck a dead G on the first bar, but I put my weight on the keys and it made enough noise to partly subdue the shouting. Then it was the rich fulness of the voice I knew so well, ringing out above the piano and all the other sounds and filling the little theater with the

notes that had brought down houses from New York to San Francisco. She hadn't finished the verse of *Goodbye Dolly Gray* before the men had stopped their noise and forgot their drinks and sat there enthralled, open-mouthed, bug-eyed, drinking it in. Perhaps it was their hunger for sight of a woman like this, illumed above them in the soft glow of the flickering oil lamps serving as footlights, the dark wine of her gown accentuating the alabaster of her shoulders, her black hair forming a lustrous frame around the pale oval of her face. Or perhaps music was something that could touch all men, red or brown or black or bad or good.

When she finished, Marshal Graham and his crowd stood up to clap and cheer, and the whole lower floor rose as one man, rocking the house with their applause, and Nevis and his crowd so forgot themselves as to join in wildly with the clapping. Only Odds Argyle remained seated, shuffling his cards; when the portly sheriff sat down again, Odds leaned forward to say something in his ear. Sheriff Nevis flushed, nodded angrily. I didn't like it.

The next number was *My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice* from *Samson and Delilah,* and Kaye could afford to do it softer and with more feeling now that she had their attention, and I made the mistake of losing myself in the music.

"Mon coeur s'ouver a ta voix,
Comme s'ouvrent les fleurs . . ."

Then, through her voice and the piano, I began to hear the stirrings on Nevis' side, in the boxes behind him. One of his deputies began beating on the railing. A cowhand broke a bottle on the table with a loud crash.

"Sing it in English," he shouted.

Marshal Graham stood up again, but the noise drowned his voice. Someone threw a bottle at the stage and it crashed into the footlights, breaking three of them on the right side.

"Nevis," shouted Graham. "Take that man out!"

"Sing it in English."

"Aux bai-sera de l'auro re . . ."

"Give us *Old Folks at Home.*"

Kaye could hardly be heard now, and Graham's orders didn't have any effect. The men on the main floor began to join in, shouting and stamping. Then a drunk in the rear box pulled a gun and began shooting at the overhead lights. Two cowhands in a nearer box hauled their iron and opened up at the stage. A footlight tinkled out; a slug skidded across the piano.

I didn't stand up to do it. I lifted my legs and swung them over the piano bench and had my Remington-Rider out of its shoulder harness by the time I was facing the audience. My three shots were the last ones.

In the silence that followed, the scrape of the drunk's chair sounded startlingly loud as he stood up, passing his hand across his head where his hat had been a moment before. One of the cowboys turned in his seat to look at his Stetson where it lay in the corner of his box, a bullet hole puckering its crown. The third man was looking at me with his mouth open a little, and he was bareheaded too.

"Just drop your guns over the railing, gentlemen," I said, "And let me warn you that the next time I won't confine my targets to your hats."

Their guns sounded heavy and metallic, hitting the floor below. I swung my legs back over the bench, laying my Remington-Rider on the square mahogany top above the keyboard.

"Miss Lawrence," I said, "will now sing *Ah, Fors' E Lui* from *La Traviata.*"

MARSHAL GEORGE GRAHAM came to my dressing room after

the performance. Kaye had sung off and on from eight until two, providing the drawing card which kept the audience in the hall, drinking and eating and watching the other entertainment, and though the night shift had come in from the mines at twelve, there had been no more trouble. I was undoing my sweat-soaked string tie and saw the door open behind my back, and stiffened. Graham leaned against the frame, shoving aside his short gray coat to hitch his hands in the smooth black belts of his Colts.

"Never saw anybody handle a Tombstone crowd that way," he said. "But then I guess they never saw a man handle a gun like that, either."

"I thought shooting men's hats off was one of your principal diversions here," I shrugged.

"Not like that," he said. "Not by a city slicker sitting down at the piano in his soup and fish. Sort of stopped them cold. Rather unfortunate for you, in a way. By muzzling Nevis' boys that way, you put your boot right down deep in the mud of this town's politics, and it won't be so easy to pull it out again. But maybe you tasted the bad beans before this evening. I saw Argyle and his Papago bad boy go into the Cosmopolitan this aft. Threaten you?"

Maybe my voice was mocking. "But Marshal, Odds doesn't have to make threats, don't you know? He just put up a proposition. He didn't tell me why."

"Obvious enough," said Graham. "On the surface, at least. Every time Whitehall gets a famous star booked for the Bird Cage, all the other saloons along Allen Street might as well close their doors, for the business they do. I'll bet Odds' Crystal Palace didn't sell ten jiggers of rye tonight."

"Ah," I said. "The motive."

"Odds has more than one motive for wanting you out of town," Graham said. "You saw Odds in the box of our good Sheriff Nevis? It never has been clear whether Odds tells Nevis what to do, or Nevis tells Odds; but either way, they ride the same horse. Nevis got his appointment as sheriff through pressure the Allen Street bunch, headed by Odds, put on the county commissioners; a lot of Nevis' political strength lies in the weight the Allen Street bunch put behind him."

"And your strength?"

"There are still decent people left in Tombstone," said Graham coldly. "They form a bloc about as strong as Nevis and Odds and the Allen Street gamblers, and the clash between us has been coming a long time. Nevis' reappointment comes up in two weeks and he can't afford to lose one foot of ground before then. As I say, his strength lies with the Allen Street bunch; what they lose, he loses. How much do you suppose passes through the Crystal Palace on a heavy night?"

"No idea. Five thousand?"

"Four times that would be conservative. Multiply that by all the other saloons on Allen Street. The sum you get is rather breathtaking; and it's the sum Odds and his bunch stand to lose every night you play the Bird Cage."

"WHILE we're discussing finances," I said, "this little upset in your monetary system seems rather fantastic."

"It is fantastic," said Graham. "Under ordinary circumstances or in an ordinary town it wouldn't be possible. The normal balance of cash and credit would take care of any emergency like this. But this isn't an ordinary town or ordinary circumstances. Two-thirds of the business houses in Tombstone are gambling halls, either owned or controlled by the Allen Street bunch, or

with interests allied to them. They could cash the miner's checks a hundred times over, but why should they? The money would go right into Whitehall's pocket. The bank running short and the failure of the agent to arrive on time was the chance they might get once in a hundred years, coming right at the time it did. But by refusing to put their cash and credit into circulation, the Allen Street boys have upset the whole financial system of Tombstone. They hold all four aces, with Odds shuffling."

"Seems sort of a laborous way of going at it," I said. "Wouldn't it be simpler just to get rid of the Bird Cage?"

"They've tried," said Graham. "Nothing can be proved, of course, but that business tonight was started by a Nevis man. Their hoodlums have started riots and wrecked the theater before, or their machine tried to bring pressure on Whitehall. But the Bird Cage diverts enough business from Odds and his boys to keep them from gaining a monopoly on Allen Street which would give them veritable control of Tombstone and Cochise County to boot, so I put my weight behind Whitehall."

"Rather a delicate balance of power," I said.

"Which your presence here might easily upset," said Graham without humor. "The political influence of Odds and his bunch consists principally of their financial strength. Two more weeks of losing as much money to the Bird Cage as they did tonight would wipe out a lot of their influence and weaken Nevis in consequence."

"Whitehall told me he was taking chits for half the business he did tonight," I said.

"And when the agent from Bisbee arrives, the miners will cash their checks and make those chits good," said Graham. "No matter how you look at it, Hammer, you're the goat of this whole thing. They've been filling this powder barrel ever since Tombstone was founded, and you've lit it and you'll be sitting right on the lid when it blows up. Think of the woman."

"She's never backed out of an engagement," I said, "hell or high water. I couldn't drag her free of Tombstone with a six-hitch mule team."

Graham shrugged resignedly. "I'd hate to be standing in your Justins from now on, then."

"Hammer doesn't wear Justins, Marshal," said Doc Rhodes from the hallway. "Can't you see those perfectly useless flat heels on his shoes?"

MARSHAL GRAHAM gave Rhodes a chilly glance and shoved by him without answering, his boots making a hard acrid sound down the hall. Rhodes moved in with a lithe ease surprising in such height; he stood several inches taller than I, hatless, his tawny hair worn long and brushed back over his ears *a-la*-General Custer.

"You told me to come back when I was sober," he said.

The first evening is always a strain, and I was rather tired. "Oh, don't be a fool."

A flush darkened his pale, intelligent face. "Don't call me a fool, Hammer. You insulted me this morning. I told you I'd be back. I'm sober now and I'm here and the woman isn't around to pull her skirts in front of you."

"Oh," I said. "A gentleman of honor. I should think you'd want it out in the street where everybody could see you cleanse the stain off your illustrious escutcheon."

His voice trembled. "Do you think I care about them? It's me you insulted."

"I thought Odds liked his work done

on the street," I said.

"Odds?"

"The insult is a very laudable motive," I told him, "but it's Odds, really, isn't it? Odds on the street this morning. Odds now."

He bent forward and one of his hands began to open and close, and his voice grew hoarse. "I'm not doing this for Odds or anybody else. I'm a drunkard and a tosspot and a bum, Hammer, and I know it; but nobody in Tombstone would have handed me what you did on the street this morning and gotten away with it, and they know it."

The sincerity in him suddenly struck me, and I took a step back because it didn't figure, somehow, in the way I had things pegged. "Isn't this rather small quarters?"

"The smaller the better," he almost whispered.

I shrugged, and began slipping out of my coat, looking for his weight. He wasn't as slender as he appeared, carrying shoulders that could mean something if he knew how to use them. He got out of his fustian and unbuckled his gun, and I folded my steel pen on the table and unbuckled my shoulder harness and wrapped the straps around the smooth holster. Then I straightened, and understood it well enough now to know how we would come.

DOC RHODES threw himself at me without a word, expelling his breath in a savage gasp. I heard the scuffle of my own feet on the bare floor as I shifted behind one shoulder with my left out front. He took it full in his mouth and came on in and his greater weight crashed me back against the wall.

There was a clattering tinkle, and a shower of broken glass from the smashed mirror was falling over the both of us. Shaking my head, I ducked beneath his flailing arms and jumped to the center of the room.

He whirled and threw himself at me again. This time he had his own left out. I ducked under it and put one into his belly. While I was still down there, his right got through my guard somehow, and after the explosion of pain in my face, there was another blow on the back of my head and I realized I had hit the floor. With a strangled cry he threw himself on me and caught my long black hair and started beating my head against the boards.

"Damn you——"

I don't know whether I said it or he did. I brought my knee up between his legs and he let out a gasp of agony and quit beating my skull on the floor. When we had gained our feet, he was still doubled over from my knee. He kept his left out though, and that length of arm favored him for a while.

Blood was sticky on my face and hands and I couldn't see out of one eye and the sounds I made were more animal than human. Somebody was shouting at the door but I was as filled with it as Doc Rhodes now, and I hardly heard them. Rhodes got his head down beneath my guard and butted me in the stomach and the whole room shook as I struck the wall with his head still in my middle.

"Hammer," someone shouted. It sounded like Kaye. "Stop it, you fools. Hammer."

I kept him against me with his head in my belly, holding one hand on the back of his neck and hitting him in the face from below with my free fist. Every time I slugged, he jerked up, gasping. Finally he got a thumb in my good eye and I couldn't see for a moment and lost him. Then I realized I was on my knees against the wall. I tried to rise.

"I can't get up," I said. "Damn you,

I can't get up."

Rhodes was sagging against the opposite wall, and he had to spit out some teeth before he panted, "Then I've beaten you . . ."

"The hell," I said and threw myself at him from my knees, hitting him in his belly. He came down hard on top of me. Hands were grabbing at us from somewhere but I fought free and rolled over and over with Rhodes until we brought up against the opposite wall. He lurched up from beneath, striking wildly. Still unable to rise, I caught him by the shoulder and twisted him sharply. The back of his neck was turned upward for that moment, and it was where I hit him. He collapsed. I lifted my hand again and could feel my smashed lips peel flat against my teeth.

"Hammer," screamed Kaye, grabbing at my fist, "stop, please——"

I didn't try to get loose of her grip, because Doc Rhodes hadn't moved from beneath me, and even through my blind haze of rage I could see how it was.

"Never mind," I said hoarsely. "It's finished."

CHAPTER III

IT WAS about six the next morning when I dressed and went down into Fifth for my cigar. Managing such a celebrity as Kaye Lawrence, a big part of my job consisted of dealing with her public, and in the larger cities this morning hour was often the only time during the whole day in which I could be alone. I had hurt my hands in the fight with Rhodes, and the left one was so sore I could hardly light the match. Then I turned down Fifth, sucking in the chill morning air almost greedily, my shoes making a loose hollow clatter in the deserted silence. I hadn't gone far when the walk shook to someone else's boots. He came toward me, calling something. The slatted doors of the Oriental Bar creaked open and slapped shut behind a swamper who came out still carrying his pail and mop; he set them down suddenly and kicked the pail over in turning to follow the first man, and the dirty brown water ran out on the planks and dripped through the cracks.

There were other men running north across the street now, and with a strange prickling excitement raising in me, I followed them. A stage stood in front of the Wells-Fargo office at Fifth and Fremont. There were only three horses in the team, two flanking the tongue and one leading them in a single trace and reins. Marshal Graham and one of Sheriff Nevis's deputies were working over something on the high seat, hiding it from view, and the driver stood on the sidewalk in the midst of a crowd, holding a bloody bandanna to his face.

"I left Bisbee for Tombstone last Friday," he was saying. "They hit me south of Lewis Springs. The team stampeded and I got thrown. Unconscious all night, I guess. Came to on Saturday morning and trailed the coach into the hills. They'd left it there, cutting loose the team and running it off. I don't need to tell you what the banker's agent for Gibson looked like. I buried him there and started toward Tombstone on foot. Late that afternoon I come across three of the team where they'd stopped to rest in a draw south of Tombstone. I took 'em back to the coach and rigged up a harness out of the traces and got started finally about ten last night. I couldn't get the shotgun guard off. I had to ride all the way in with him like that."

HE WAVED his arm to where Nevis' deputy had dropped off the box

seat, revealing what he and the marshal had been working on. The guard had been sitting upright in the seat, pinned to the back by six or seven arrows, any one of which would have sufficed. The heads had been buried so deeply into the wood behind the man that it had been necessary to pull his body away from the back of the seat and cut the arrows off behind him before he was freed. There were little lines of strain around Graham's set mouth as he sliced the last shaft and caught the body as it slumped forward. He reached around in front and pulled the arrows out one by one, holding them by their feathered ends. Then he allowed some of the crowd to lift the corpse off, and dropped down himself, looking at the arrows.

"The Chiricahua Kid?" said Nevis.

"I don't know," said Graham, rubbing his jaw. "I don't know. The Kid disappeared fifteen years back, Nevis. In 1870? Yeah, 1870. And before he disappeared, he never was any road agent. He was only fighting for his people, like Geronimo was in his earlier days. The Chiricahua Kid never hit a stage line before his first disappearance ——"

"Don't be a fool!" flamed Nevis pompously. "Who else ever used all red arrows? You saw how far they were driven in. Through the man and through the wood behind. You know any other Indian around here capable of handling a shortbow like that?"

"No," said Graham. "Still——"

"Chiricahua Kid or not," said Garrison Whitehall, who had come from the Cosmopolitan in a striped dressing gown, "you'd better find whoever's using those red arrows before your reappointment comes before the commissioners, Nevis, or they'll have a new man behind your star. That's the second stage in two weeks. And those Orejo ranchers last month."

Sheriff Nevis flushed; then he turned and heaved himself onto the sidewalk and stamped off toward the Crystal Palace. The crowd had begun to fade and I moved over to Whitehall.

"That's why the banker's agent was late," said Whitehall, waving his hand distractedly, "and there goes the miners' pay. They said the Chiricahua Kid got a hundred thousand or so in specie the agent was carrying.

"This is insane," I said. "In a town as rich as this, you'd think something could be done. How about all the gold you pull out of the mine every day?"

WHITEHALL shook his head. "We don't handle the crude stuff here; the refineries and stamping mills are in Fairbank and the bullion is shipped direct to Bisbee from there. As far as the dust goes, our wires have been cut—The Chiricahua Kid, no doubt — and we can't get anything through to Bisbee, and the paymasters here won't issue any dust without authorization from the officials in Bisbee. That's the Allen Street bunch again; they have strings on half the men in Tombstone, and half the mines; aid when the paymasters refuse to move, they're speaking under pressure from Odds and the gambling crowd. It's become more than just getting the miners paid or not getting them paid, Hammer; don't you see? It's the final test between the two factions here in Tombstone, and your presence here forms the crux of the whole thing and the Allen Street faction is willing to upset Tombstone's whole economy to get you out. If the miners get paid and the economy is normalized before you leave, I cash in and the Allen Street faction loses its shirts for the two weeks you're booked here. They'll be in the red when Nevis's re-appointment comes up, and the influence their money gave

them will be gone. Without that influence behind him, Nevis will be out; and without Nevis to stand between them and Marshal Graham's party, the gamblers on Allen Street will be through."

"And if the town's economy isn't stabilized . . ."

"I'm the loser," shrugged Whitehall. "Which is what Odds and his boys are working toward. They know what a blow to me this business about the banker's agent is. I expected to cash in all the IOU'S and chits I've been accepting when he arrived. I extended myself farther than I should and I haven't been able to meet my own bills without any cash receipts coming in. Half the men I owe are under the influence of Odds and his crowd, and the Allen Street bunch will start putting pressure on them now and I'll be closed up. It's just a vicious circle. Under ordinary circumstances an established business like the Bird Cage could run several months on credit; but now, with Odds and his faction blocking every normal avenue of cash or credit, I'm about washed up."

"You'll open tonight?"

"Maybe for the last time," he nodded dismally. Then he shook his head. "We're talking about how it affects me, but the Bird Cage isn't the prime factor in this, you know. It's your presence here that moved the Allen Streeters to perpetrate this colossal absurdity. They're only trying to close the Bird Cage to get you and Miss Lawrence out. Be careful, Hammer. It isn't over yet."

He moved away, shaking his head and muttering irritably to himself. A pair of Wells-Fargo clerks had carried the guard's body into the office, and the only man left near the stage was the doctor, a red-faced little man with pince-nez glasses on his bulbous nose and a neat white goatee. He waved absently after the clerks.

"Can't do much there, can I?" he said. "I hear you had a little trouble last night, though. Your face all that got hurt?"

"Hands a little sore."

He took one and his gently probing fingers drew a gasp of pain from me. He looked up, still holding my hand.

"A *little* sore?" he said. "I should think so. You've broken just about every metacarpal in it."

KAYE saw the splint when I came in, and the rich color left her cheeks because she knew what it meant well enough.

"Sorry," I said. "I should have thought of you. There's a point, however, in a thing like that, when a man quits thinking at all."

"I know," she said, and came close enough to disturb me with her perfume. "It's all right, Hammer. So I've lost my accompanist, so all right. You needed a rest anyway. We'll refund what money Whitehall's given us and maybe your hand will be healed enough to play again for our Tucson booking. It isn't that worrying me. It's the fact that you did quit thinking. I saw your face last night, Hammer. You were too far gone to remember, but I saw your face while you were fighting Rhodes. It frightened me. I never saw you like that before. You were always so reserved and self-controlled, such a master of any situation. In New York you wouldn't have let yourself go like that. You would have considered the possibility that a fight might hurt your hands and you would have handled it some other way. What's gotten into you, Hammer? You're so changed."

I turned away sharply, going to the window. She didn't follow me; she

moved around the room restlessly, finally began to make small talk.

"Reading the Tombstone *Epitaph* today. The editor was quite upset about this financial crisis. Said the people were beginning to feel the pinch; at first it was just the big operators but now even the small money is getting tight. He was lacerating the paymaster for not putting the dust into circulation. It seems the logical way of easing the situation. I couldn't even get a ten dollar bill changed today . . ."

Someone knocked on the door, and I heard the rustle of her skirts toward it. Doc Rhodes came in.

"Heard about your hand, Hammer," he said. "You won't be able to play tonight?"

"Tonight or any other night, in Tombstone," I said. "But what does it matter? Whitehall won't be able to keep his doors open much longer anyway, and he couldn't pay us even if I could play. One way or the other it would have been the finish."

"And the Allen Street bunch have gained their point," said Rhodes. "You'd like to stay?"

"It will be the first booking we had to cancel in three years," said Kaye sadly. "Professional pride you know. Sort of gets in your blood. If it wasn't for Hammer's hand, I guess we'd stay until Whitehall had to close, whether he paid us or not. I've gotten to like the fat little man, toupee or no toupee. It seems a shame he has to go down under the gamblers this way, without a chance."

"I used to play," said Rhodes.

I turned for the first time from the window, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. "What are you talking about? Can't you let it be? You fixed it so we're through here. That's what you wanted, wasn't it, you and Odds? What's the idea of this?"

"I told you last night I didn't have anything to do with Odds," he said. "The idea of this is that I used to play the piano, and if you want to stay, I'll try again."

"You can make that offer," I said, "after last night?"

"I'm not making the offer to you, Hammer," he said and he was looking at Kaye.

WE TRIED it out after lunch in the empty theater. Doc Rhodes *had* played. His crescendos were a little ragged and he had to cover a lot of sloppy treble work with his base chords, but he must have had class at one time and it still showed. The house was packed by eight-thirty, with people even standing on the sidewalk outside to catch some of the music. I found Whitehall in the wings, fussing with his toupee.

"You'll stay tonight, Mr. Hammer," he said nervously. "I know Doc Rhodes will do all right on the piano if you say so, but you won't leave, will you?"

"I hadn't thought of it. Why?"

He waved a harried hand toward the crowd. "They haven't forgotten what you did last night. As long as you're in sight, they won't cause any trouble."

I was surprised how soon the noise stopped when I went out and held up my hands for silence and announced the first number. Rhodes was a little shaky at first, but Kaye turned partway around so she could meet his eyes as she sang, and he seemed to gain confidence from it. I remembered how she used to look at me that way . . .

An usher appeared in Marshal Graham's box while Kaye was doing a Stephen Foster medley, whispering

something into the marshal's ear.

Marshal Graham frowned, gave Whitehall the nod. Whitehall moved to the box and bent forward to hear what Graham said; then Graham rose, cast a look across to Nevis' box, and left. Whitehall came back, shaking his head.

"Oh, why did I ever get into this business. All I wanted was a nice quiet neighborhood theater. Then I had to get the bright idea of booking Lily Langtry on her tour through the west. It drew such a big crowd I had to expand the house. Now look. I'm not a theater manager. I'm just maintaining the battle ground for the private war between Marshal Graham's party and the Allen Street bunch. If I smile at Graham, Sheriff Nevis is liable to give Odds the nod, and the hoodlums from the Crystal Palace go to work on my chandeliers. If I look at Nevis, Marshal Graham might get it into his head to close me up for serving liquor after hours. If I hire good people, I'm bucking Odds Argyle; if I don't, I go broke. Why did I get into it, Hammer?"

"Graham?" I said.

"Oh." Whitehall made a vague motion with his hand. "Some trouble up on Fitch Street. He had to go, you know. His duty. Left word he'd be back as soon as possible."

"Fitch is way up at the other end of town, isn't it?" I said.

An usher tapped me on the shoulder. "The Wells-Fargo man is out back, sir. Something about your passage to Tucson."

"But I have tickets," I said. "Tell him later."

"He says it's urgent. Something about cancelling the runs until this Chiricahua Kid is cleaned out. No drivers will take the coach or something."

"But we're booked in Tucson," I said. "We have to leave the Sunday after this one."

I LOOKED at Kaye and nodded my head out back; she smiled an answer, still singing. I left Whitehall, muttering it would be only for a minute. The back hall was dark and I left the inner door open so I could see the stage from the outer portal, which led onto an alley. My shoes made a hollow sound down the passage. A man drew his dark shadow at the opening ahead.

"What's this about my passage the twelfth?"

"We can't assure you passage," he said, stepping back into the alley, "on account of this Chiricahua Kid business . . ."

His voice was muffled, and it was automatic for me to take a step through the door toward him to hear clearly what he said. Then I realized the Wells-Fargo clerk hadn't been that big. There was a scuffling sound from both sides and they were on me. One, two, ten—I'll never know. But what happened inside me occurred all in that instant while I was going down beneath them. In the theater behind, I caught the sound of a shot and the first yells, and knew why Marshal Graham had been drawn to Fitch Street and why I had been pulled out here—and suddenly I was swept with a rage that shook me more violently than the weight of their bodies slamming me against the ground. It was the same savage, primitive lust of battle that had gripped me in the fight of Doc Rhodes, blotting out all the sophistication and suavity and culture of those years with Kaye, unleashing every tameless, pristine animal instinct that had always lain beneath.

A blow struck the back of my head, driving my face into the bitter earth. Mouth filled with dirt, I convulsed be-

neath them like something erupting from the ground and heard my own ravening scream of utter, frenzied rage.

I grabbed an upraised arm and pulled the man down hard on top of me before he could strike, jamming my knee upward.

"Damn——" he gasped, and collapsed on me. I hooked him around the neck and slugged him in the face and caught his gun and twisted it from his hand. Then I was on my knees, pistol-whipping at a second man, seeing him reel away and carry a third with him. Their very numbers were against them; unable to shoot for fear of hitting one another, they milled around me, getting in each other's way. I took a blow in the mouth and, spitting out blood, threw myself against them toward the stage door, my own screams drowning out the other sound, slashing and firing with the gun.

"My God," shouted someone, "he's loco, he's loco . . ."

I hit blindly at a face and felt the flesh pulp beneath my blow and threw myself over the man as he fell away from me. Someone caught my coat. I kicked a man out of my way and slipped out of the arms at the same time, still going forward, forced to drop the gun so my hands would slide through the sleeves. I left two of them jammed in the doorway holding my coat and had my own Remington-Rider out by the time I reached the auditorium, thanking God it had been my left hand which was broken.

The place was swarming with shouting, cursing, yelling men. A bunch of miners had pulled down a chandelier, and it made a glittering splash of broken glass in the middle of the fighting mob on the main floor. A cowboy from the lower floor threw himself into the rear box on Nevis' side, his weight carrying one of Nevis' deputies against the rail; the thin wood splintered and collapsed, and both struggling men fell into the seething crowd below.

NEVIS wasn't in the first box, nor Odds. A bouncer from the Crystal Palace was climbing over the smashed footlights, followed by six or seven toughs from the other saloons. Doc Rhodes stood with his long legs spread on the edge of the stage, and a barfly already lay groaning at his feet, and one of the toughs reeled back from his clubbed Colt. Kaye stood right behind him holding a bottle by the neck for whoever wanted it first. Rhodes kept trying to push her back but she wouldn't move. Then he caught sight of me.

"Get her out, Hammer. I'll hold them off here. Get her out back——" He had turned around far enough by then to see me fully, and he trailed off with his mouth still open, a wide shocked look entering his eyes.

My shout sounded hoarse. "They're out back too, and coming in."

He was still staring at me that way, and it seemed an effort for him to speak. "We can't just stand here."

"We're going out the front," I shouted, and caught Kaye around the waist and swept her toward the boxes along the side nearest to us. A drunk gambler was climbing over the railing onto the stage, and he grabbed for a gun and I shot him and he fell on his face with his feet still hooked over the gilt rail. Through the din I heard someone screaming like a crazed Apache and suddenly realized it was me.

I swung Kaye bodily over the railing and she was looking at me the same way Doc had, her eyes wide and shocked, and filled with a faint, growing horror.

"Hammer," she said unbelievingly

and put her hand up to her mouth. "Hammer . . ."

All the boxes opened onto a narrow hall which ran down between them and the side wall, leading to a stairway which opened onto the main floor. One of Nevis' deputies lurched from this passage through the door of the first box, levering at a Winchester. I vaulted the rail and swung Kaye around behind me and my Remington-Rider made a dull boom over the noise. The deputy fell across one of the rickety chairs, smashing it with his weight.

FROM the height of the box I caught sight of the close-packed, deliberate little group of men standing at the three front doors, and then saw Nogales among them, Odds Argyle's Papago bad boy, and I realized what was happening. The men by the door were all bouncers or barmen or gamblers belonging to the Crystal Palace and the Oriental Bar and they blocked the exit completely. Their intent was patent: they meant to keep the fighting crowd of miners and cowhands and townsmen inside the Bird Cage until it had turned the building to a shambles. Three screaming, kicking, cursing miners and a pair of high-heeled cowhands surged toward the door in their mass struggle. Nogales stepped out, pistol-whipping one of the miners across the face, slashing at a cowhand. A pair of bouncers followed him up with short clubs they used in the saloons. The trio forced the miners and cowboys back until they were caught up in the main battle again and had forgotten about trying to get outside where there was more room to fight. Then Nogales and his men moved back to block the door.

Doc Rhodes came jumping over the rail of the box, firing backward at the men who had swarmed onto the stage as soon as we had left it. I went through the door into the passageway first, stumbling over a body in the narrow darkness before reaching the stairs. Another deputy with a Winchester was coming up the stairs, and his first bullet made a hollow sound striking the wall behind me.

With thought of Kaye back there, I couldn't quit firing until my own gun was empty. I stopped long enough by the deputy's huddled body at the foot of the stairs to scoop up his Winchester, and I hit the main floor with the .30-30 clubbed. I went into a pair of yelling miners first and struck one hard enough to knock his chin out of his beard, and jammed the butt of the gun into the second one's thick belly. A cowhand loomed up and I hauled the gun back to swing, feeling my lips peel across my teeth in a snarl. A strange, terrified look crossed his face and he threw himself backward before I could hit him. I heaved myself bodily against the struggling press of men, hacking viciously with the clubbed rifle.

I chopped at a pale face and felt the dull shock of flesh and bone smashed beneath the hard oak of the gun's stock and saw a man hauling his short-gun and I hit him across the chest with a backward swing that smashed him back against a pair of drunk townsmen and all three fell in a writhing heap. I jumped over their flailing arms and legs, driving a struggling group of miners ahead of me with my berserk screams ringing out over their shouts.

There was something about a rifle wielded like that which no crowd could stand up to for long, and I saw what was happening. I had driven them back until their press was surging against the Allen Street men blocking the front door, and Nogales was fighting a desperate, losing battle to hold the frenzied crowd inside.

Doc Rhodes lurched up beside me.

He could wield his Colt with lethal effect at the end of his long arm, and the added fury of his charge beside me broke the ranks in front of us, and the crowd was no longer solid there and I realized they must have finally broken through Nogales. I saw him then, the Papago with the dragging foot. With his men scattered and the breach made, he no longer had any reason to stay at the door, and he had a reason to come through the crowd toward me that way with no expression on his dark face; it didn't need any expression to tell me his intent.

A frock-coated gambler got in my way with his derringer, and I hit him across the face and felt the splintering shock clear to my shoulders, and when I raised the Winchester again, the stock was gone from it.

"Look out, Hammer——"

DOC shouted it, because Nogales had broken through the last bunch of struggling men and his gun boomed from the hip. I felt something hit my side, and spun with the blow. Off-balance, I threw myself forward with Nogales' second shot whipping by my head, and struck wildly at his gun hand with the barrel of the Winchester. He screamed with the pain and his Colt made a sharp, hard sound hitting the floor and when I struck again it was at his twisted face and I stumbled across his body before he had completely fallen beneath me.

I don't remember the rest clearly. Stumbling into the thinning crowd and hacking blindly at the bobbing faces with the broken barrel of the .30-30. Whitehall spinning from somewhere out of the haze and holding his toupee up in the air like a trophy of victory, shouting at me.

"Hammer, you've done it, you've driven them out, you've saved the Bird Cage, Hammer . . ."

Other faces appearing from the fetid surge of the mob, and hands, and legs, and screams, and my own hoarse, animal sounds. Then someone grabbing at me from behind, and Kaye's voice.

"Hammer, stop, stop! It's all over. You can't chase them clear down Allen Street. Are you crazy? Hammer, stop . . ."

Kaye was shaken up a little, but nothing else, and after giving her something to quiet the nerves, the doctor tended to my wound, which wasn't as bad as all the blood would seem to indicate, and then he and Doc Rhodes left. I couldn't remember much of the fight, now I noticed Kaye watching me intently, a sort of puzzled fright in her big dark eyes.

"What got into you?" she said hesitantly. "The same way you were when you fought with Doc Rhodes the other night. It scares me, Hammer. You were like a raving maniac. No wonder they couldn't stand up to you. The whole crowd. When you came running in from the back, Hammer. Your face. Like a madman. An animal. What was it?"

I took a deep, shuddering breath, beginning to feel the full pain of my wound and my bruises. "What would you want me to do, give them Brahms' *Cradle Song?*"

"Don't be like that." She shook her head sickly. "I can't understand it. You were always so cool and deliberate, so completely in control of all your emotions."

I said: "The time hasn't come for that kind of explanation, so let's forget it. There are pleasanter subjects. Your Doc Rhodes, for instance, was doing rather brilliantly at the piano before that business started. You seem to work well together; he'd be a good accompanist for you."

"*My* Doc Rhodes?"

"You like him a lot," I said.

She put her hand up to stroke my shoulder, not meeting my eyes. "Hammer. Eddie——"

"Never mind," I said. "I don't blame you. He's a very charming fellow when he wants to be. Cultured, smooth, amusing. Got a lot of good qualities. And he hasn't touched a drop of red-eye since that first day you arrived. Given time, your influence would undoubtedly regenerate him completely."

Her voice was sharp. "Don't talk like that."

I took her by the shoulders. "I mean it, Kaye. If you like Doc Rhodes, that's fine. Maybe I've misjudged him; maybe he isn't in this with Odds. It certainly didn't look like he was tonight. If he isn't, then that fight he and I had doesn't count."

She looked up at me. "You really mean it, don't you? You aren't being sarcastic. You don't even sound jealous.

"Was I ever?"

"You never showed it," she murmured. "But you know there was never anybody else, Eddie."

"Did you ever consider," I said, "that your feeling about me might not be the real thing, might just be the result of our intimate association over such a long period of time, sort of a habit, like drinking old-fashioneds even though you really don't like them?"

"Oh, no!" Her voice had risen. "No, Hammer. That isn't so. You never told me how you felt, but you know how I feel. Don't ever say that."

"Why not?" I said. "Are you afraid to face it? I saw the way you looked at Doc Rhodes tonight. If there's any doubt in you, look at it. Then look at Doc again."

"Eddie——"

It had been a long time since I'd done this, but I couldn't help how I felt about her, even if I'd always hidden it, and I tilted her chin up and kissed her. She was breathing hard when it was over, and she pulled away to look up in my face.

"You never did it like that before, Hammer," she said. "It was almost like . . . goodbye."

CHAPTER IV

I DIDN'T wake until about nine the next morning, so stiff and sore I could hardly roll out of the bed. I soaked in a hot tub for half an hour, with a cigar, and took my time shaving. Kaye's room was empty and I shut her door softly after standing there a moment remembering the countless breakfasts we had eaten together like that.

Whitehall met me in the lobby. "Miss Lawrence up yet?"

"She had a breakfast date with Rhodes," I said. "You look happy for a man with a wrecked theater."

"I've just been down looking at the Bird Cage," he said. "The Allen Street bunch thought they'd smash the place? They've got another think coming. They didn't count on you, did they?"

"But they did," I said. "They sucked me out just like they sucked Marshal Graham. That wasn't any Wells-Fargo man at the back door."

"I know, I know," he said; "but you got back in, didn't you, and stopped the riot before the Allen Street bunch held them in there long enough to wreck the house. You're a terror when you get going, Hammer. So quiet and gentlemanly and unassuming ordinarily. Wouldn't suspect you had that wild streak in you. I wish you would stay here permanently. Most of the lights were smashed, and the furniture, but I'm having new fixtures installed this

morning and hauling out some of the old tables I stored away when we redecorated for Lily Langtry."

"Where did you get the credit for the fixtures?" I said. "Why go to that trouble? You said you were through."

"On the contrary," he chortled. "Why do you think the Nevis faction perpetrated that riot last night?"

"I wondered," I said. "They already had you sewed up, and the Bird Cage would have closed anyway. Why go to the trouble of wrecking it?"

"Because their little plan to upset Tombstone's economy is all washed up," he said. "Word came last night, just before the show. I didn't hear about it this morning, but they heard at the time, and that riot was a last desperate attempt to finish things. Wells-Fargo runs a spur line from the stamping mills at Fairbank directly to Bisbee, and one of their stages passed our coach the night of the holdup; it must've been just after the Kid had cut loose the team and left it, and before the driver had come back to it. The Fairbank stage carried the news on to Bisbee. A rider hit Tombstone, coming in from Bisbee last night, just before curtain time, and he brought word that the bank is sending another agent with the money and a big enough military escort to stop every Apache in Arizona. They should arrive tomorrow sometime."

"I suppose Nevis knows?"

"He knew it last night," grinned Whitehall. "That's the reason for the riot. And he knows you prevented the mob from wrecking the theater. He knows you've blocked them again, Hammer."

GRAHAM came into the hotel, his gray Stetson not quite hiding the bandage on his head. "Morning, gentleman. I hear our Mr. Hammer stopped the show last night."

"You should have seen him," chuckled Whitehall.

"I guess they thought they had it all set up," said Graham. "Nothing can be proved, of course; nothing ever can. Odds and Nevis were out of the Bird Cage before anything started, I take it. That trouble on Fitch Street was to suck me out. They put a Colt's butt to my head on a dark spot in Fifth. I had my suspicions when I left the theater, but I had to go, you understand. I walk just as narrow a trail as Nevis. One misstep and I'm off. Refusing to go last night would have given the Allen Streeters a wedge to separate me from my Marshal's star. Claimed I was neglecting my duty or something. And neglect of duty would stick in the city council's craw."

"You and the city council, and Nevis and the county commissioners," smiled Whitehall.

"County commissioners is right," said Graham. "The word you put in got some action. The county board told Nevis he'd either better clear up this Chiricahua Kid business or be looking for another job when his re-appointment comes up in two weeks. Nevis put a pair of his Papago trackers on the trail the Kid made getting away from the stage coach job last Friday. One of the Papagos came in last night with news that they'd struck hot tracks and followed them into the Dragoons. The tracks led on through the Dragoons to the Chiricahuas, but the Papagos wouldn't go any farther without the sheriff."

"I wouldn't go on either," said Whitehall. "Patagon and his Apaches are holed up there in the Chiricahuas somewhere."

"Patagon?"

"Means Big Foot," Marshal Graham told me. "The army nailed Cochise a

long time ago in Stronghold Canyon, and trapped Geronimo in the Sierra Madres last September, and this Patagon is about the only bronco Apache left. More than one white man has wandered too near the Chiricahuas and never come back. The Allen Street bunch tried to keep Nevis from going, but this time it's the Kid or his job. The Sheriff left this morning about three o'clock. Fat and pompous and crooked, you still got to hand him credit. Mighty few men would go in there after the Kid."

Doc Rhodes came in through the door, a smile on his battered face. "Well, compatriots, is Miss Lawrence up yet?"

"I thought you had a breakfast date with her?"

"I did. Ten o'clock. I'm on the dot."

It was a long moment before I spoke. "She wasn't in her room."

Whitehall tugged at his toupee. "You don't think . . . you don't . . ."

I WAS past thinking. It was like the night before. I didn't hear the hard apprehensive rattle my shoes made on the front steps nor feel the man I shoved aside nor know whether Rhodes and the others were following me as I ran down Fifth. A lone barman was in the Crystal Palace, leaning a disconsolate elbow on his polished mahogany, and the place still reeked of stale tobacco and whiskey from the night before. He took his elbow off the bar and looked surprised and that was all I saw before I ran by him. There was a balcony over the bar with stairs leading up at either end and three doors lining the wall. I shook the stairs going up, and that was what Nogales must have heard. The Papago came out of the last door, dragging his leg.

"Odds room?" I called.

He was in front of the middle door before I had reached the top of the stairs, and I could see the weal across his face I had made with the rifle the night before. "He ain't here, Hammer. You can't go in."

"Don't try and stop me, Nogales," I shouted.

"I'll stop you," he said, and went for his gun.

After it was over, I stepped over his body and shoved the middle door open, my Remington-Rider still in my hand. It was a sumptuous office with a heavy Chippendale desk in the middle and oils of nudes on the wainscotted walls and a faint odor hanging in the air. None of Odds' dancing girls would use perfume that expensive. Kaye's *Barbanche!*

"He shot Nogales. Hammer. He murdered Nogales!"

It was the barman shouting it, and it whirled me. He stood in the hall on the other side of Nogales' body, with a couple of miners and a swamper, and behind him was Rhodes and the marshal, and through them I could see more men coming in the saloon. I backed across the room.

"She's been here, damn you," I said. "That's her perfume. You had her here."

"Who?" said the barkeep. "What you talking about. You can't——"

"Stay right there," I said, and shoved up the window, still holding the gun on them. "Hear that, Doc? They had her here."

It was a long drop to the alley below and I turned my ankle. Limping, I headed toward the runway between the Crystal Palace and the stables next door, which led me out onto Fifth. Men were already running from the saloon. I knocked the reins of a pinto from the first rack I came to, and swung aboard.

"There he is!" yelled a miner. "Hammer," and he began shooting.

I swung the pinto out into the street and had it in a gallop by the time I passed the Cosmopolitan, heading out of town. I could hear horses behind me, and began reloading my gun, putting my shoes into the pinto and wishing they had spurs on them. But I had known where I was heading and had picked the best horse on that hitchrack for the job, as hurried as I had been. The pinto was a tough hairy little brute with chunky hocks that meant enough speed in the getaway, and a bulging curve to his windpipe that meant plenty of wind for the endurance I would need on the longer run, the kind of a horse an Indian would like.

I PASSED the sage flats east of town with pursuit still in sight, but had shaken all except one man by the time I reached the foothills. He had a big rangy gelding and there was something about his seat in the saddle that caught at me. I pulled in the pinto and turned with my gun up.

"That was a fool thing to do," called Doc Rhodes, "burning down Nogales."

I slowed down and let him bring up with me. "He pulled on me."

"That won't stand. Somebody ditched Nogales' gun and the Allen Street bunch are already claiming you did it in cold blood. They'll have the town whipped up to lynch you on sight. How can you do anything for Kaye now?"

"They had her in that room," I said. "I'm after Nevis. If I get my hands on him he'll tell me where she is, believe me."

"I do," he said. "But why Nevis?"

"Because we don't know where Odds is," I said. "And Nevis is in with Odds, isn't he? The sheriff went after the Chiricahua Kid? That sounded all right at first. How does it sound now? Did it ever strike you how convenient it was for the Allen Street faction that the Chiricahua Kid should stop that specific stage. It prevented the agent from reaching Tombstone and would have meant Whitehall was through if the Fairbank coach hadn't happened to pass the Tombstone-Bisbee stage just after the holdup. Has the Kid's work ever coincided with the Allen Street bunch's business before?"

"Come to think of it," said Rhodes, "yes. The sole support of the school at Tombstone is derived from an operating tax on the saloons. Last month, Odds and his gang tried to repeal the tax. The decent people in Marshal Graham's party opposed the measure. The biggest part of their bloc was formed by ranchers in the Orejo Basin. The Kid raided the Orejo, and by the time he was through, the ranchers were too. A rancher without a spread is as useless as a saddle without a cinch. Their opposition ceased and Odds put through the repeal and the school is no more."

"Marshal Graham seemed to doubt it was the Kid."

"He was right about the Chiricahua Kid never doing that kind of work before his disappearance," said Rhodes. "Only time you found those red arrows in a white man then was when the white man gave some good provocation. But nobody else ever used them, and who could shoot a bow like that?"

"Ever see the shoulders on Odds Argyle?"

"You mean he's the Kid?" said Doc.

"No," I said. "Odds Argyle isn't the Kid."

WE FOUND Sheriff Nevis in the Dragoons. Taking the old Cochise Trail through these mountains, we had topped the crest of the last ridge and were dropping down toward the Chiricahua Basin when my horse shied at something beside the trail I wouldn't have spotted. I had my gun

out by the time I was on the ground, and found him in the timber a ways.

The arrow through his leg must have struck him first, knocking him back against the tree with its terrific force, where he had fallen to a sitting position, getting the second shaft through his belly then. It was driven in so deeply through him and into the pine trunk that only the last red feathers showed against the darker red of congealed blood covering his paunch. He didn't recognize me at first.

"The double-crosser," he babbled. "I didn't know he was doing that. All along he was doing that. I didn't know I was trailing *him* when I went after the Chiricahua Kid. He got my Papago trackers. See 'em?" Then Nevis recognized me. "By God, Hammer!"

"Who were you trailing, Nevis?" I said. "Who's double-crossing you?"

Sheriff Nevis didn't have long to go and he was delirious, I guess. "Leave it alone, damn you. I been pulling at it all day, trying to get loose. Turned my guts to hamburger. What you doing here? Damn double-crosser. Leave it alone. How'd you find me?"

I quit trying to free the arrow. "Graham told me your Papagos had stuck hot tracks in the Dragoons. They were following the Chiricahua Kid and he would have taken the old Cochise Trail through these hills because that's the way the Indians always take."

"Only an old timer'd know the Cochise. You're a greenhorn. You, Doc?"

"I didn't know the Cochise existed," said Doc. "This is Hammer's."

"How'd you know, Hammer?" gasped Nevis faintly. "Who are you?"

"Yes," said the man who had stepped from the trees on the slope above, "who are you, Hammer?"

ODDS ARGYLE carried a hickory shortbow in one hand and a bunch of long red arrows, and it suddenly struck me how easily he could have passed for an Indian if his hair were longer. I hadn't done anything with my gun because of the others behind Odds. The old one had a turkey red bandana about his coal-black hair, and the hip-high Apache botas folded over until they reached only his knees, providing a double-thickness of buckskin to protect his shins from the brush. The Winchester he held in the crook of one elbow wasn't pointed at me, but enough of the others were, held by the half-dozen young bucks standing behind him.

"Hola, Patagon," I said. "It's a long time since the Cochise Stronghold."

His feet made a small surprised sound, shifting in the pine needles. "No *belin'ka,*" he said, using the ancient name for white man, "would know about the Stronghold."

"The Chiricahua Kid?" I asked, waving my hand at Odds.

Patagon nodded. "He returned to us five years ago."

"He's been dealing from two decks, then," said Doc Rhodes. "In Tombstone he's known as Odds Argyle."

"Of course," said Patagon. "That was the way we've been doing it ever since he returned. How do you think we've managed to remain free out here? Whenever General Miles sends out another expedition against us, the Kid, living in Tombstone as Odds Argyle, warns us in time; he can keep us supplied with ammunition and even rustled beef when the hunting is bad. He has helped us raid the Orejo and the Pinta."

"How do you know he's the Kid?" I said. "Did you recognize him when he came back?"

"The Chiricahua Kid was only twenty when he left our people in 1870," said Patagon. "He returned to us a man of thirty. There were few of us

left who had known him as a boy and it would be hard to recognize anyone after so long, especially when he had changed from a boy to a man. But as soon as he shot the bow, we knew him. None of our warriors could equal the Kid on the bow."

"Did you ask him where Cohise is buried?"

'Why should I?" said the old Apache.

"If he's the Chiricahua Kid, he would know wouldn't he?" I asked. "You and the Kid are the only ones left who know where Cochise is buried, Patagon. You accepted Odds Argyle as the Kid merely because he could shoot the bow? You accepted him and did whatever he said because he was the Chiricahua Kid? When he wanted you to rob a stage coach or raid a ranch or ambush a sheriff, you did? You're getting old, Patagon. Twenty years ago you wouldn't have accepted him so easily. Did you need his help that badly? Why don't you ask him now the things he should know? Ask him why the Apaches never gather *beyotas* in Stronghold Canyon, Patagon."

Patagon hesitated, looking at me strangely, then turned slowly to Odds Argyle. A doubt darkened his old eyes, and the other Apaches were looking at Odds too. Odds made a vicious gesture with his bow.

"Don't listen to this loco——"

"Can't you tell him, Odds?" I said. "Go ahead. The acorns are ripe in Stronghold Canyon but the Apaches never touch them there. The Chiricahua Kid knows why, and Patagon. Tell him, Odds."

Odds' voice was a hoarse whisper. "Damn you, Hammer——

"Why," said Patagon, "don't the Apaches gather *beyotas* in Stronghold?"

Odds opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. I waited a moment longer, until it was clear that he wouldn't answer.

"The Apaches never gather acorns in Stronghold Canyon because it is the Spiritland of Cochise," I said. "They buried him there, and the Chiricahua Kid and Patagon and others who are now dead rode their horses from one end of the canyon to the other all day long so that all signs of his grave would be lost forever."

"Only the Kid and I would know that," said Patagon, looking at Odds. "You don't?" Then it must have struck him, because he turned toward me suddenly. "Then, you are——"

"The Chiricahua Kid," I said.

CHAPTER V

ODD'S breath made a small, hissing sound in the silence. Then, taking that moment while they still stood in shocked surprise, he jumped at me with an explosive grunt. It caught me off-guard and his solid weight carried me back against Doc, and the three of us fell to the ground. While I was still going down on top of Rhodes, I felt Odds' thick fingers around the hand I held my gun in. The terrible strength of that momentary grip drew a gasp of pain from me, and when he let go and grabbed my gun, my numb fingers released it without resistance. He jumped on over Doc and me. I tried to turn over on Doc and grab Odds' feet; he kicked me in the face and was on past. The Indians had recovered from their surprise and were jerking at their Winchester levers. Odds was turned far enough around by the time he reached my pinto and the Remington-Rider boomed in his hands with the first shot and one of the young bucks fell forward on his face. Odds swung aboard the pinto, emptying my gun at the Indians in a swift series of shots that set them jumping for cover while they tried to

pick him off the horse with snap shots. By the time I got up off Doc, Argyle already had the pinto going down through the trees.

Patagon shouted something and the Apaches scattered into the trees above the glade where their horses must have been. Doc had caught his mare and was already turning her after Argyle. I started to run downslope after them, then stopped, realizing how useless that would be on foot. Argyle was already gone and Doc was disappearing into the aspens at the foot of the slope. There was a crashing to my right and the Indians made their brief, flitting shadows through the pines, heading their mustangs in a breakneck gallop after Doc and Odds. I made a jerky move their way, then stopped again. It was suddenly very silent in the glade. With a biting frustrated anger shaking me, I heard Sheriff Nevis groan, and moved to him, cursing myself for letting Odds surprise me like that.

"My hoss," said Nevis faintly. "Staked on that juniper down the Cochise about a quarter-mile. Left it there when we spotted the Kid and came in after him."

He slumped over the arrow holding him to the tree. Dead.

IT WAS a big Morgan mare and it had been there a long time and it was fretting with thirst. I swung aboard it, forcing the animal toward the ridgetop above me; it took me fifteen precious minutes to find a naked place where the timber didn't obstruct my view. Then I could see down the east slope into the Chiricahua Basin.

The riders were barely perceptible below me, but I could see what had happened. Canny old Patagon had cut in between Odds and Tombstone with his Apaches, forcing Odds to turn away from the direction he would have taken back to town. He was headed across the basin now, not willing to meet them on the open flats; he was heading straight into the Chiricahuas.

I slid the Morgan through the talus to timberline and bent low in the big Porter saddle on down through the belt of white pine and juniper and finally aspen, into the open sage flats of the basin, the harsh, familiar crags of the Chiricahuas looming nearer and nearer as I drove the animal through the choking dust. They must have caught up with Odds in the footslopes; it was where I found the first Apache. He lay in a bed of ocotillo, with the red arrow protruding from between his shoulder blades, gripping his own short-bow in one hand. It struck me for the first time how near the end my people must be. In the old days I had been the only one using a bow; the others riding with Cochise or Geronimo had all carried the newest repeating rifles and latest Colts and scorned the weapons of their fathers. But now it was like Graham had said. Cochise had been caught by the army in Stronghold so many years ago, and Geronimo had been trapped in the Sierra Madres last September, and now it was only Patagon left, with his handful of ragged warriors, making their last stand, reduced to using whatever weapons they could get their hands on. The bow was this Apache's only arm, and I had to take it or nothing. In my rage at being such a fool and my frenzy to get Nevis' horse, I had completely forgotten I was without a gun. I worked the buck's dead fingers from around his handful of arrows. Why not, though? It was fitting, somehow. If I met Odds, it was what he would use.

The Apaches called it *Say Yahduset,* which meant Point of Rocks, and they believed the voices of the dead could be heard here on a moonless night. It

was a weird, haunted place, somewhere deep in the Chiricahuas, formed by succeeding aeons of eruption and erosion and inundation, its red and yellow pillars of sandstone thrusting up from pock-marked buttes which were surrounded by huge masses of granite that spread their fantastic shapes across the black fields of lava and into gleaming knife-edged draws of pure schist. I came upon the pinto below the first spectral slope of the *Say Yahduset;* it was down and dying from more than one gunshot wound. Halfway up the slope were the Apaches' mustangs where Patagon and his men had left them, because a mounted man topping that first ridge would have skylighted himself to whoever was beyond. I left the Morgan among them, and took off my steel pen so the tails wouldn't get in my way, and removed my shirt because the white cloth was a dead giveaway on a bare slope.

My skin lacked the ruddy color outdoors would give it, but the racial darkness was still there. I found Doc's horse near the top, standing hipshot and jaded in the meager shade of a huge black boulder. They were all farther in, then, stalking Odds, and I squirmed over the ridge with a film of sweat already bathing my body from the heat of the sun, oiling my muscles and giving my movements a smooth felinity they hadn't possessed in fifteen years. It was the old game now, and that was how long since I'd played it. I found a spot in the soft dirt where the Apaches had gathered, evidently for a pow-wow, and then separated to spread a net around Odds. I trailed one of them down the slope into the bottom of a valley and turned down the valley a ways through the fantastic formations of granite and lava to where a *sere motte* of dry cottonwoods threw their disconsolate shadows. Climbing the opposite slope, I found the second dead Apache. He sprawled back against a boulder where the force of the arrow had carried him. I was still trying to tell how long ago he had been shot by how thickly the blood was congealed in his wound, when the dribble of shale came down from the ridge above me. I whirled, and Odds had just topped the lava uplift and was as surprised as I.

"Hammer!" he cried, and he had his arrow already notched, and I saw the surprise in his face as he jumped down.

I DIDN'T make the mistake of trying to get my arrow notched. In that last moment, I threw myself back into the fissure below the boulder and heard the twang of his gut and felt the arrow drive past my head and strike the rock behind me. I had my arrow in the string before I hit the bottom of the narrow fissure and I lay there, stunned and bruised by the fall, waiting. His voice came rustling down to me, soft as the whisper of a woman's dress.

"So you're the Chiricahua Kid?" he said.

He was smart enough; he knew what he would have gotten if he let his excitement bring him in after me. But he also must have known how little time he had, with Patagon and Doc out there somewhere.

"I thought you and Nevis were on the same horse?" I said, and tried to place him when he spoke.

"In Tombstone we were," said Odds Argyle, and there was a faint scratching sound beneath his voice that might have been made by his body moving across the shale. "But there were things I needed which Nevis couldn't do for me, or wouldn't."

"Like the stage coach?" I said.

Odds' voice was sibilant. "Yes. Nevis didn't have the stomach for the

dirty jobs like that which had to be done once in a while to protect our interests. I couldn't let that banker's agent reach Tombstone and get the miners paid off, could I? If I'd used ordinary triggermen on any business that benefitted me as obviously as that stage coach operation, the Graham faction would have pointed the finger my way. They couldn't blame me for what the Chiricahua Kid did, though, could they? Whenever those red arrows showed up in someone's belly, nobody ever connected me with it. I started it about five years ago. My father was a Yaqui and maybe I got my talent on the bow from him. And maybe Patagon needed help bad enough so he didn't ask too many questions when I, as the Chiricahua Kid, showed up in his camp with my proposition."

"Kaye?" I said.

He chuckled thinly. "Only as a last resort, Hammer, only as a last resort. All our other attempts to get rid of you had failed. You wouldn't accept my offer that first day, and you botched the riot we tried to start by shooting off those hats. When we got word that another banker's agent was coming through with a military escort, I knew Patagon's Apaches couldn't help me stop that stage like we did the first one, so we started to wreck the Bird Cage again. Only you broke that up too. Nevis was against taking the woman, but we had to do something to get you out of there before the second banker's agent arrived. Nevis was afraid of what you'd do if we took Kaye. You had him buffaloed and he was trying to back out of the deal."

"That's why you shot him?"

THE small scraping sound came again. "No. I still needed him to stand between me and the Graham bunch in Tombstone. But the damn fool had to come out after the Chiricahua Kid. I pulled that stage robbery last Friday and sent the agent's specie with Patagon, who brought it back through the Dragoons by the Cochise Trail. I was back in Tombstone the same day. When the driver came in Sunday with the coach and the dead shotgun rider, Nevis put his Papagos to tracking me and Patagon away from the spot where we'd left the stage."

"He didn't know you were the Kid."

"Of course not," said Odds. "I told him to drop it, but the commissioners were on his tail. We got Kaye Lawrence about two-thirty Monday morning. It couldn't have been much later that the sheriff's Papago hit Tombstone with news that they'd cut the tracks made Friday from the stage holdup, and followed them into the Dragoons. I made the mistake of taking Miss Lawrence through the Dragoons on the Cochise, because that's the way we always went. Nevis wasn't actually following me when he caught up; he was on those tracks Patagon and I had made Friday. I guess he thought he'd caught the Kid red-handed. Well, maybe he had, but not the way he figured. He came in shooting. What else could I do?"

He had covered his movements by his voice and I hadn't been able to follow him because the wind coming down off the ridge carried the sound the wrong way, and now he was where he wanted to be, and it was coming. I opened my mouth, and couldn't hear anything. I quit breathing, and that didn't help. I began to remember the shot-gun guard, pinned to his seat by arrows driven so deep the stage driver hadn't been able to get him off alone. And Nevis, held to that pine all morning with the single shaft. No wonder the Apaches had accepted Odds as the Kid. Few men had that power on the bow. It was

those shoulders.

But there was more than power involved. It was an axiom on the frontier that a good bowman could loose six arrows so fast that the sixth would be in the air before the first had struck its mark. The first arrow had struck Neivs in the leg, and he had the time to stagger back and fall down in a sitting position against the tree before the second one had pinned him to the trunk. That long an interval between the two arrows might indicate that Odds had depended too heavily on his natural power, neglecting to develop his speed in proportion. It was the only thing I could count on.

The wind whined down the slope and scattered talus sibilantly across the slickrock, and it was the only sound. My hand was sticky with sweat around the *bois d' arc* of the bow I held. The lip of the fissure began to undulate with purple heat waves.

"All right, Hammer!"

His broad bulk loomed suddenly from behind the lifting granite and his gut made its sharp twang. I threw myself forward so my momentum would keep me from being carried backward by the teriffic drive of his arrow, and with the shaft making its dull thwucking sound in my shoulder and twisting me halfway around, I had my gut back to my ear, and jerked squarely to the front again, and still stumbling forward, let the gut snap.

"All right, Odds," I shouted, and then shouted again, every time an arrow left my bow, "all right, all right, all right . . ."

Going ahead in a staggering run, I had my fourth shaft out before the first had hit him. The surprise crossed his face as he saw my skill for the first time, and then the anger as he realized he could never get his second arrow notched, and the pain as my first bolt struck him in his thick chest.

He staggered backward with its force, trying vainly to put his arrow on his gut. My second one drove home and he took another stumbling step backward, dropping his bow and his handful of arrows. My third one made its dull fleshy sound going in, and his hands were clawing at the three shafts as he fell backward, and the fourth one went home before he had fallen.

I sat down because the pain of the one through my shoulder nauseated me. I don't know how much later they came. Doc Rhodes was first, and he began cutting the shaft free with his Barlow knife. Then Patagon. The old Apache nudged Odds' body with his foot, looking for a long moment at those four shafts buried so close together in Odds chest. Then he turned to me.

"The woman is in our camp, Kid," he said.

THE tepees were much like the dome-shaped Navajo hogans, the frame of cottonwood branches thatched with mud and leaves. A handful of ragged squaws in tattered red blankets and a dozen fierce, ragged warriors with bandoliers of Winchester shells crossed on their naked brown chests stood around us while the shaman brought Kaye from the medicine lodge. Her face was stained with tears, the rich wine of her gown smudged and torn.

"Someone came to my rooms last night, Hammer, after you left. I didn't recognize him as Odds' man. He told me you'd gone back to the Bird Cage and gotten hurt badly. I didn't stop to think, Hammer. More of them were waiting at the theater and they took me to Argyle's office and held me there till they brought the horses around the back way to that alley." She stopped, turning her wet eyes up to me. "They

told me. Patagon. The Chiricahua Kid? You said you hadn't come from Tombstone."

"I told you Tombstone wasn't my home town," I said. "I left here in 1870, before Tombstone was founded. These mountains are my home, Kaye, the Dragoons, the Chiricahuas. I rode with Geronimo, until he quit merely defending his land and people and took to raiding and plundering and killing on any excuse, or none. That wasn't right. It's honorable enough for a man to defend his country and I'm not ashamed of anything I did. But I couldn't take it Geronimo's way. I was twenty when I broke away and drifted east. At St. Looey I got a job in the Rocky Mountain House, working in the taproom, and ran into an old broken-down music teacher entertaining there. Edward Forsythe Hammer. He gave me more than his name. He took me under his wing and found out I picked up things fast. Taught me English and discovered I had a talent on the piano. I guess he was mainly responsible for my becoming the Eddie Hammer you knew, Kaye. It was ten years from the time I left here till I met you in New York. A man can get a lot of polish in that long a time, if he works at it, or has a talent."

"Why didn't you let me know?" she said huskily.

"I couldn't bring myself to do that," I said. "I knew our separation would date from the day I told you who I really was. No matter how much you fought it or tried to ignore it, it would have always stood between us; it was what formed the gulf between us anyway, Kaye, even without my telling you. And merely telling you wouldn't have done any good, Kaye. You would have laughed and told me I was a fool to think it could stand between us. A person has to see it to understand. Haven't you seen it now? When I had the fight with Doc, and the night of the riot at the Bird Cage. You saw it and was horrified. As soon as we hit the frontier, all those old things began to boil up in me, Kaye, the primitive things, the animal things. I thought I could blot them out with education and culture and civilization, but I was wrong. I was never happy in New York—I was always lonely and apart and inhibited with trying to act civilized. I couldn't live in your world and you couldn't live in mine, Kaye. You don't want a savage for your husband, a man who goes crazy like that when he gets into trouble, you don't want half-breeds for children . . ."

"No, Hammer," she said desperately. "How can that change my feeling for you, how can anything?"

"What is your feeling?" I said. "You thought it was love, and when you met Doc and began to have your doubts, you were afraid to face them. Five years is a long time to be together; Kaye, and you form ties and habits you're afraid to break when the time comes. Admit it to yourself, Kaye. I saw the way you looked at Doc when you were working. He's your kind. Get away from me and break all the old ties and you'll see what you felt for me was just the result of being together so long. You sensed our difference from the first, Kaye, and you were fighting it all the time. You won't have to fight Doc. He's your kind . . ."

She began to cry hopelessly, and I looked across the dark perfume of her hair to Doc, and he understood. They helped her on a horse, unresisting now, and she turned in the saddle to look at me for the last time.

"That kiss in the Cosmopolitan last night," she said. "You knew then. It *was* goodbye."

I nodded without speaking. The

horses lifted a dead gray dust downslope out of the camp. Patagon moved in close beside me.

"We let Odds Argyle lead us because we thought he was the Chiricahua Kid," he said, "and he led us the wrong way, the way Geronimo had. Now we have found the real Kid, and you said you left because you couldn't do it that way. How *would* you do it?"

I motioned back into the Chiricahuas. "There are valleys back there which the white man will never see while we are alive. We can return to the old ways."

"I've been trying to tell them that," nodded Patagon. "I think the younger bucks will take it from the Chiricahua Kid when they wouldn't from the old man. Yes, the old ways." He looked after Kaye and Doc. "You were right about the gulf between you and the woman. It would have been like trying to make the sun and the moon rise at the same time. Perhaps you were right, too, about her not really loving you. But how did you feel toward her, Kid? You never said."

"No," I told him huskily. "I never said."

WESTERN Oddities

By ALEXANDER BLADE

These are true tales of the West which are as strange as any ever told in fiction stories

THE LAKE OF THE SKY

CALIFORNIA, the pearl state of the "Golden West," possesses one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. Its scenery and picturesque landmarks give delight to the traveler and stranger. One of these landscapes, which make California famous, is Lake Tahoe, commonly referred to as "The Lake of the Sky." It is so called because when one suddenly and for the first time sees this body of water it appears to him as if he is looking up into the sky: the color of the water matches, in fact excels, the beauty of a blue sky on a clear spring day.

In 1844, Fremont, that renowned American pioneer, set eyes on this magnificent body of water. He was the first white man to do so. He named the water "Lake Bonpland." Although many of the names given by Fremont to various lakes and rivers have remained to this day, the name Lake Bonpland soon was discarded.

In the territory of Lake Tahoe there lived many Indians in whose midst there grew up, as always does among the Indians, a host of tales and interesting legends concerning the lake and the surrounding territory, some of which are related in the following paragraphs.

Long ago there lived in Nevada a good Indian who, in spite of his goodness, was incessantly bothered by an Evil Spirit. After due consideration, he decided to leave his home and travel to California, thereby freeing himself from the Evil Spirit. But, unfortunately for him, every time he attempted to escape the Evil Spirit would thwart his plans in one way or another. Finally the Good Spirit came to the stricken Indian's aid and gave him a particular bunch of leaves which possessed magical qualities. The Indian was to start his sojourn and if he saw the Evil Spirit approaching, he was to drop a leaf and water would immediately spring up where the leaf fell. Since the Evil One could not go across water, it would have to go around; thus, the Indian would be able to outrun the Evil Spirit.

So the Indian started off and after he had traveled a while he cast a glance backward and sure enough the Evil One was approaching with terrifying rapidity. The Indian, in his excitement, dropped almost the whole bunch of leaves. However, to the Indian's relief, a huge body of water soon began to rise and, in a short time, Lake Tahoe lay between him and the Evil Spirit. Then the Indian continued on his journey reassured of a successful escape. After a while, however, he turned around and saw the Evil One approaching again. The Indian immediately began to run with amazing speed and dropped the remaining few leaves and small lakes and rivers came up to pro-

tect him from his enemy. Thus at last the Indian arrived safely in the Californian valley. This is the way the Indians of the Lake Tahoe region believe the lake came into existence.

An intriguing tale also arose over a wild-grub pit in the Lake Tahoe region. It goes as follows: Once there was an old Indian who lived with his two grand-daughters. He was a somewhat mean man and forced the sisters to work hard all day so that he might eat and sleep. Pretty soon the two sisters became disgruntled with this sort of economic system and decided to run away. One night their chance came, so they fled away into the darkness of night until they were utterly and thoroughly exhausted. Whereupon the two girls fell on the ground and, looking up into the sky, wished that they were living up in the Heavens with a starman for a husband. Eventually, the Indian girls fell asleep. The next morning, upon awakening, they were startled, yet delighted, to find themselves up in the sky. They also discovered that the elder sister already had a star-baby. At first the sisters liked the baby. But, since he cried continuously, they threw him aside and refused to console him. So the baby, angered and filled with the lust for revenge, went to find his great-grandfather the Moon. While the baby was gone, the sisters became somewhat tired of living in the sky and longed for life on the earth. Suddenly the Moon came to avenge the mistreatment of his grandson. He picked the two sisters and shook them so hard that the very skies thundered and roared. Then he threw the sisters down to the earth where they fell upon their grandfather, who was carrying many bags of acorn and flour, with so much force that they made a huge hole in the ground. To this day the Indians relate this tale and, so they say, find plenty of wild acorn and wheat in this pit which was caused by the downward plunge of the dissatisfied sisters.

It is interesting to note how the Indians look upon Nature and how they relate all of Nature's mysteries to the human being. The two legends cited above are indicative of this fact.

BUFFALO DESTINY

THE history of the western Indian is linked tightly to the history of a solitary animal. The strength that he showed in beating back the white man in the early days, and the weakness later, left him prostrate and completely dependent on the bounty of his paleface enemy, came from this singular mangy brute of the western plains—the buffalo.

More than the horse to the Arab, the camel to the Arabian nomad, the reindeer to the Laplander, the seal to the Eskimo, or the elephant to the Hindu, the buffalo filled such a large place in the life of the Indian people that life itself was impossible without it.

Almost every part of the beast's body was vitally important to the Indian's existence. The lodge of the Indian, his bed and covering, his clothes, his weapons of war, his shield in battle, kettles for his food, boats for crossing the river, material for his saddle and halter, strings for his bow and arrow, hair for ornamenting his dress, every bone from the strong horns to the hoofs, and finally the meat itself—these were the staples provided for by the buffalo.

The hunt of the buffalo was obviously a most important art to the Indian. Days and weeks were devoted to preparation with the most rigid laws against individual hunting for frightening of the herds—with even more rigid attention paid to the religious rites to keep the Evil Spirit from the hunt.

There were many methods of hunting this important beast. The direct onslaught method was that by which a group, in careful order, would ride directly upon the herd until the beast scented the danger and then, breaking into a curious gallop, each hunter would go his own way shooting the animals as they rushed to escape. The "still" hunting method, often adopted by the American sportsman, was to steal unobtrusively on the leeward up to the edge of a buffalo herd. Then utilizing the best concealment available, the hunter would begin to fire on the animals. The buffalo, never alarmed at the crash of a rifle so long as he saw neither smoke nor hunter, would stand idly by as his companions fell. Perhaps they might even gather round the wounded animal and try to make it rise or even lick its wounds. Only a change in direction of the wind or the uncovering of the hunter would make them flee.

The Indian, however, killed the animal only for his needs and wisely took steps to see that the herds would never be depleted. It was the paleface who wantonly destroyed the animals to satisfy the demands of the fur market in the East. It was estimated that they were wiped out at the rate of a quarter of a million a year. To this number add the slaughter by the "sportsmen" of the middle nineteenth century and we can understand how a single generation sufficed to exterminate a species that would normally require ages of geological history.

It was this policy of the wholesale destruction of the buffalo that, as much as anything else, caused the bloody Indian Wars. The Indians understood all too clearly that the extermination of the buffalo was the beginning of the end of the Indian race. It came about exactly as they suspected, for when the buffalo was gone the Indian was defeated, and westward expansion moved ahead.

This was undoubtedly one of the most important reasons why the great Indian tribes feared so much the coming of the white man and fought so hard to stop him. The bloody Indian wars that cost so many lives were, to a great extent, caused by the Indian's determination to protect this vital food supply.

ANGELS WITH SPURS

MAYBE it is because my son Johnny has swapped his saddle and rope for an airplane with guns on it, leaving me and Beaver Teeth to run the outfit, alone. Maybe it is war nerves or the tobacco shortage. But when Beaver Teeth tells me I'll find the two cowhands I have ordered by mail, in the bunkhouse, and I run in there and see two females, me with a hole in my jeans and my shirttail hanging out, I bust a cinch.

"How did you get in here?" I yell. "Who are you?"

They don't scare a bit when I bellow. They are twins and pretty, too. Prettier than a sunset shining through the rain clouds over the Cactus Mountains. But I have all the scenery I need around here. Twenty-thousand acres of it.

"I'm Jingles Randall," one of them says.

"I'm Slim Randall," says the other. "Beaver Teeth brought us out from town."

By James C. Lynch

When two pretty girls show up on a ranch and insist on running the place, things are bound to get a little mixed up!

"That'll be enough from you two," said Jingles

"Oh he did, did he?" I say. "Well!"

I back out. Beaver Teeth is down by the corral. He has his long arms wrapped around a horse's neck and his ugly face buried in its mane. He is laughing. Beaver Teeth does not hear me coming. The way he is hanging, he has a sway in his back that makes his saddle seat stick way out. I plant the toe of my boot right there. He straightens up like he has turned into a tall fence post and, when he turns around, I let him have it right where his big front teeth hang out. He sits down hard, right where I kicked him.

"You tall, unbeautiful coyote," I tell him. "You told me you fetched two good cowhands out from town. One of them a tophand horse breaker. What kind of a joke is that, you double-jointed gopher?"

Beaver Teeth feels his fangs, as if I could hurt them any. I've seen him pitch off a mad horse, right on his face and never split a lip, his teeth are that strong and that far out.

"You struck me," he says. "Boss, I am going to climb up off this here ground and tie your ears together behind your neck."

He rears up and falls at me like a lightning struck tree. I move in fast and get something in my eye, which turns out to be Beaver Teeth's fist. It sets me back about twenty feet.

Am I mad! "Wahoo!" I yell, and start for him. And he starts for me. And I almost have to laugh in his face. Behind him is one of those females he calls a cowhand. She has let loose the prettiest loop I have ever seen and it is due to settle right over that bean pole about the time I am ready to start swinging. Won't he be surprised.

He brings up short about two yards from me, with a good stout grass rope pinning his arms down. I pick one up from my spurs. And right then I know how a cow-critter feels when you dab a loop on his horns going at a high lope. A rawhide riata settles over my chest, nearly cutting me in two. "Whoosh!" I go. And then Beaver Teeth and I are leaning toward each other, our noses almost touching. It is ridiculous.

Beaver Teeth is disgusted. "I quit," he whispers. "I'm through. Washed up. Finished riding for this two-bit outfit. I want my time."

That kind of talk scares me out of my wits. "You can't quit," I tell him. "You're frozen."

"And you're loco, he says. "It is a hundred and ten in the shade."

"You have been frozen by one of those four letter bureaus," I tell him. "Why I can't even fire you for playing such a dirty trick on me. Anyway, what would Johnny say if you quit when I need you the most?"

"Johnny would take you to a head doctor," he spits. "I want my money. I'm done."

I am really in a pinch. "Please, Beaver Teeth," I beg. "I am sorry for what I've done. I'll make it up anyway you say."

He sticks his teeth way out and looks me up and down. And in my mind I keep raising his pay so I won't be so shocked when he tells me how much he wants.

"Well, all right," he says. "If that's the way you want to handle it. I'll stay if you'll furnish me four packs of tailor-mades a week and four bags of sack tobacco. And plenty of papers. I roll them thin."

"Why you belly-robbing sidewinder," I start in.

"It was your idea," he says. "And I don't want any more of your jaw, either. If I stay, all I want to hear you say is, 'Here, Mister Beaver Teeth, is your tobacco.' "

Somehow I have to keep the place

from running down at the heel until Johnny comes home. "All right," I say. "It's a deal. And I hope you get pitched off your bronc into a cactus patch just before a stampede tromps you to death."

I RELAX and the loop pinning my arms down goes slack. I come to then and jump around, spitting sparks.

"That does it," I say. "No woman can hogtie me with a rope."

"It has been done, once," says Jingles Randall. "What's all the argument about, anyway? After all, you hired us."

"You're crazy," I tell her. "I hired a horsebreaker and a top hand. You're fired. Beaver Teeth will drive you back to town."

"Ain't enough gas to get halfway back," says Beaver Teeth. "And the new tickets ain't good until next month."

"Shut up," I tell him. "Don't speak to me."

"I wasn't," he says. "I was talking to myself."

There is nothing else to do, so I say, "All right. You can drive them in tomorrow, in the rig. Put their gear in the house. By and by I'll cook some supper."

"We certainly hate to put you out," says Jingles.

I shrug and drag my spurs down to the corral and climb up on the fence. The ponies start milling around. I start to roll a smoke and put the tobacco away again, remembering Beaver Teeth. Why I won't be able to smoke anything but dried leaves. Which makes me so doggoned blue I feel like saddling up that big wild sorrel and giving him a ride. Only Johnny can't even ride him. And Johnny can ride anything except that sorrel.

I am still sitting there when Sheriff Lefty Heidenry rides up. Lefty looks saddle galled and bad tempered.

"No," he says, "I am not going to climb down. I'm practically glued to this here saddle. I've spent three whole days looking for somebody running off with your calves. Wes Norton rode with me all day yesterday. Nary a sign did we find. You been reading a book about rustlers, or something?"

"My tally book," I tell him. "Only one out of five of my cows had calfs this season. No one else is having that trouble."

"Don't yell at me," he says. "Maybe no one else is having that trouble because they get out and comb the brush instead of waiting by the back door of the house for the little critters to walk up and get branded with a stove poker. Why don't you get some help? Oh, I know you can't get top hands, they're in the army. But other outfits are doing with what they can get. Take Wes Norton. . . ."

"You take him," I say. "My good friend, Wes Norton. He won't even let me water at the Spellman place spring."

"Now don't talk hard about Wes," says Lefty. "You know he's not sure about his title to the Spellman place. Spellman was a squatter. Norton's lawyer told him to keep the place fenced until he was sure of the title."

"Bah!" I tell Lefty. "Go away."

I SURE need comforting. Mary used to comfort me, but she died giving me Johnny, twenty years ago. So I just sit there and mope until it starts to get dark, then I climb down and drag myself toward the house. I have to cook for Beaver Teeth and two women. I get to wishing that gopher poison didn't smell so bad you could detect it in fried potatoes.

I bump into Slim at the back door of the house. "There you are," she says. "Supper is ready."

"Well that is neighborly of you," I growl, and step inside, going cross-eyed trying to look at two things at once. The table has a cloth on it and a big platter of thick steaks from the side I have hanging in the cool house. There are spuds and gravy and big light biscuits and three apple pies. And Beaver Teeth has dressed up and shaved. He looks like a gopher that has stuck its neck out just as a haymower went past.

Those two girls are prettier than ever, flushed from the hot stove. "Which one of you did this?" I ask.

"Mother," says Slim.

"Mother?" I say. "Well, bring the lady in. I want to make love to her. I haven't seen a table like this in years."

Slim laughs. "There's your chance, Mom," she says. "You heard what the man said. He wants to make love to you."

I get kind of sick and my face gets hot. "You don't mean to say," I say. "You don't mean that Jingles . . . ?"

"Slim is my own daughter," says Jingles. "Now we had better sit down before things get cold."

"But you can't be more than twenty-five," I say. "Not a day."

"A pretty speech, Mister Calhoun," she says. "I am thirty-seven. Slim is nineteen."

"I can't believe it," I say. "Why you're only five years younger than me."

"You don't look a day over thirty," says Jingles, smiling. "And you act at least twenty years younger."

BEAVER TEETH has a mouthful of meat and he goes, "Ha!" and starts to choke. I am sorry when it does not prove fatal. I feel like I have been slapped in the neck by a cold, wet wind.

They start passing me things and the more I eat the madder I get. If only I could learn to keep my big mouth shut. Here I have already fired these two before I know they can cook like this. And before I know a pretty woman like Jingles Randall is only five years younger than me. I'll bet it would tickle Johnny to have a mother like Jingles. And say, when he gets a look at Slim. . . .

Beaver Teeth says, "This here food is tops, ma'am. A man could do a day's work on this grub. But you take now burned steak and bitter coffee and biscuits you can't tell from lava rock. I'm sorry you two ain't staying on."

I have already made up my mind they are going to stay. Only I wouldn't let on to Beaver Teeth if it would save my life. In the morning I am going to take Slim and Jingles aside and make them an offer they can't refuse. In the meantime I only top off with three pieces of pie to show them I can take this kind of cooking or leave it alone.

"That was a real supper," I say. "Now if you ladies will excuse me, I'll get my pipe."

"It's out in the bunkhouse," says Jingles. "All your things are out there."

"Well!" I say. "I don't recall telling anybody to move my things out of my own house. This is my house, isn't it? Or is it?"

"It is," says Jingles. "But we thought it would be awkward for you to keep coming into the house everytime you wanted something. We have decided to stay."

I never have been a shrinking violet. I've whipped a few good men in my time. And I have been taken apart for talking when I should have been listening. So, when two women, pretty or not, try to throw me out of my own house I get up, glaring like a jailed drunk eyeing a deputy sheriff, and walk out.

Beaver Teeth follows me, laughing. He is still laughing when I turn in. I have to do something. Something that

will make me the boss around here again, instead of a joke. "First thing in the morning," I say, out loud, "I am giving that big sorrel a ride if it kills me." Which makes Beaver Teeth laugh all the harder.

IT IS just grey daylight when I pull Beaver Teeth out of his bunk. "Come on," I tell him. You're helping me saddle that sorrel."

He hauls out, grumbling remarks I pretend not to hear so I won't have to take exception to them like a man ought to. But when I get my bucking rig out of the saddle shed, he folds up.

"Matt," he says, "Don't be a plumb danged fool. Johnny can't even stick that locoed animal. I ain't going to let you ride him."

"Oh, you're not, eh?" I say. "Maybe a woman can run me out of my house, but I got to see the color of the man's hide who says I can't ride my own horses. And before you try and stop me, remember there's no women folks awake yet to tie me down."

He follows me to the corral, not saying a word. Which is discouraging. When Beaver Teeth's jaw stops wagging it means he has hold of an idea. When he gets that way he is like a bulldog with his teeth sunk in a hobo's britches. Something has to tear before he'll let loose.

We go through the gate and close it and I drop my saddle and shake out a loop. The ponies come to life and start milling around. I look. I look again and then I look at Beaver Teeth. His mouth is hanging open the same as mine. The big sorrel is gone. So is a grey, the best roping horse ever foaled and the meanest critter before noon a man ever had to knee in the belly to tighten a cinch on.

"Gone!" I yelp. "Stolen right out from under our noses. By Godfrey, Beaver Teeth, I'm going to find those ponies if I have to ride from here to California."

"I'm with you," he says. "I can stand a boss who hires women. I can stand a man who lets himself get run out of his own house, but when some long-complected so-and-so steals a horse I raised from a colt, that makes me mad. Let's tighten our belts with some grub and light out.

We go tearing for the house and bust into the kitchen, me yelling, "Slim! Jingles! It's us. We been cleaned out by horse thieves."

They don't make no sound. But the kitchen stove is warm and the place smells like coffee and bacon and hotcakes and larrup. And there is a note on the kitchen table.

Slim and I are riding out to look over the place. We are taking the big sorrel and the grey. See you later. *Jingles.*

"Well," says Beaver Teeth. "That blows up our idea about horse thieves. I'll just pour some of this sweet batter on the griddle and. . . ."

"You rock-headed dodo!" I yell at him. "They're probably dead. Tromped to death. Both of them. Put down that bowl and saddle up. Hurry! Good Lord . . ."

I tear off the screen door getting out, but it was sagging anyway. By the time I rope out a fast horse and cinch on my rig, even Beaver Teeth has caught on fire.

"You ride east and I'll ride west," I tell him. "When you come to them, fire three times. They can't be far."

I RIDE a mile and a half so fast I almost wind break the horse I'm riding. Then I see that sorrel's head sticking above the brush and his saddle

is empty. And yonder is the grey. I yell out a string of blue blazes and go charging toward the sorrel, feeling like choking it to death with my bare hands. And Jingles stands up, yelling at me.

"Max! Don't scare him. What's got into you?"

I pull up and slide out of the saddle, bug-eyed. There she is, standing there big as life. A calf starts to bawl and I stand there like I have never seen a tied calf getting marked with a running iron. Slim, is doing the job and I have never seen a prettier one.

"Good morning, Matt," she says. "Tally two for this morning. The hunting is good."

And Jingles says, "You get your breakfast all right, Matt?"

"Sure, sure," I tell them. "It's a fine morning. What are you aiming to do, now?"

"Scout up some more slick ears," says Jingles. "Any objections?"

"Not me," I tell her. "But that horse you're riding, it's a seventh wonder he hasn't thrown you and stomped you to death."

"Why he's a dear," says Jingles. "Gentle as a kitten. Get him for me, will you Matt?"

Well, long as she asks me in such a nice way, I spur over for that big sorrel and he rears up, waving his front feet like he is going to stomp me right out of my saddle. My pony shies away and both of them women laugh at me.

"He's a killer," I say. "A mean killer. You stay off of him."

"Fiddlesticks," says Jingles. "Here, Red! Stop that and come over here."

Danged if that big red devil don't come down and mosey over to Jingles like a young squirt caught with his hands in the jam pot. She scolds him a minute and steps up into her saddle. The sorrel shows his teeth, but only because he is looking at me.

"See," says Slim, tickled. "Mom can ride anything."

BEFORE a week she has that horse so gentle that Beaver Teeth and I can ride it. But I never felt comfortable doing it and Beaver Teeth only tried it once.

I learned a lot in that week, too. I found out that Jingles has been a widow since Slim was only a year old. And that Jingles has raised Slim and run a few hundred head of cattle up to a big ranch which she run by herself until Uncle Sam bought her out and laid a big bomber school out across her pasture lands. She said a friend had told her how hard up for help I was so she had written me a letter, asking for jobs for herself and Slim. Not mentioning they were women for fear I wouldn't hire them.

Being a fool, I wouldn't have so I kept thanking my stars Jingles was so smart. There was a feeling coming over me that was mighty nice. Beaver Teeth complained it made him sick just to look at me. Every time he walked past me he would open his mouth and roll back his eyes like he was going to die the next step he took. If I hadn't been so slopping over with the milk of human kindness I would have kicked him in the teeth.

Of course the ranch wasn't improving much. Hard as we worked, the calf tally wasn't half what it should be. And our grown beef was shucking weight walking back and forth to water. Wes Norton still kept the Spellman spring fenced off.

But it is hard to worry when I can sit on the porch of a warm night and talk with Jingles and Slim. The night birds would sing and the land smelled good. If Johnny were only here. Johnny and Slim would make a great pair. So would us two old folks, the way I

figure.

So I keep wishing Johnny would hurry home and that Jingles would give up riding that big sorrel. Every time she lights out alone I gnaw on my shirt buttons until she is back safe. Which is why I lost my head when I top out on a high ridge and see that sorrel standing there with an empty saddle and Jingles flat on her face, her head stuck under a brush.

My heart comes right up to where I can taste it. "Jingles!" I yell. "Oh, God, don't let her be hurt bad."

I GET out of my saddle and kneel down beside her. She pulls her head back and rolls over on her side, looking at me so funny. After a long while she says, "Why Matt!" and my face starts to burn it is that red. She is not hurt at all.

"I thought that devil had thrown you," I start out.

"I know," she says. "I heard you. You're awfully sweet, Matt." And her fact starts to glow warm like the embers of a campfire up in the pines. Something a man can't help staring at. Something that makes you dream of fine things.

Jingles gets hold of herself first. She holds up a pair of binoculars. "Get down here and have a look," she says. "Keep your head under this bush so the sun won't reflect on the lens and warn him."

I lay down close beside her and scrooch under the bush. It is right on the edge of the ridge and I can see across the whole basin, all the arroyos and folds and dry hills, clear to the hazy Cactus Mountains. Jingles stretches her arm and points.

"See that red pinacle? Follow south toward that patch of broken rock and the slope covered with trees. Now take the glasses and look."

I glass up the pinacle, follow south like she says and pick up a thin twist of wood smoke and then a man working over a tied calf. It is too far away to make out the man, but the saddle pony, about twenty yards from him, is Wes Norton's personal mount.

So it is Wes Norton branding a calf. Nothing wrong with that, long as it is his calf. I get some ugly thoughts for a minute, then feel ashamed of myself. Why, I've known Wes for thirty years.

All of a sudden Wes jumps like he had been nipped in the pants by a sidewinder. I see him turn, like he had felt me looking down the back of his neck. Then I hear the flat crack of a rifle shot.

Wes starts for his pony, running. He gets about halfway and stops like he had seen a spook. I see dust spurts fly up in front of him and, after awhile, some more shots echo up to us. Jingles pounds me on the back. "That's Slim!" she says. "Slim's caught your rustler!"

"Slim is crazy!" I yell. The glasses make everything so plain I holler as loud as I can. "Slim! Stop it. Run, Wes. Hit for the timber!"

HE DOES that, just like he had heard me. And who wouldn't have with a fool woman plowing up the ground all around you with hot lead. Cussing a blue streak, I jump up and run for my horse. Which scares it and makes it shy away. While I am chasing it, Jingles whistles up her sorrel and lights out like a scared rabbit. She is already standing by the stomped out branding fire, fanning herself with her hat, when I ride up.

"Nice of you to finally make it," she says. "For all of you, that rustler could have killed my girl."

"Rustler my great aunt," I tell her. "That was Wes Noston. Serves Slim right if he does kill her. I only hope he never got a good look at her. If he

did we'll never get to water a head of stock at the Spellman place."

"Well," says Jingles, "I'm going to follow tracks and see what happened."

She starts off up the hill and I follow along, hoping we won't find Wes full of lead. We don't. And once he gets to the rocks, we run out of tracks.

"He shook Slim," I say. "Now he's bound to head straight for home. We might as well ride over and face the music."

Jingles wants to argue the point and keep hunting for Slim. But I point out we can hunt for her riding toward the Norton ranch as easy as we can any other place, not knowing which way she went, anyway.

We are almost to the Norton gate when who should come riding the other way but Wes, himself, and Slim. They are riding side by side, talking serious and when they see us, Slim waves and starts to gallop our way, Wes right with her.

When they pull up, both Slim and Wes just sit there and look at us. I wait. After all, Wes has the first punch due him. I'll let him shoot off his face and then try to calm him down. I can always point out that Slim is just a kid who couldn't hit the inside of a barn with the doors closed. Finally his jaw starts working.

"Matt," he says, "I don't know how to thank you for having this fine little girl around. She saved me the best pony in the country. More than that, she saved our beautiful friendship. That's what she's done."

I KEEP staring at him until Jingles whispers, "Stop looking like Beaver Teeth. Say something."

So I say, "What are you talking about, you old goat? A fine friend you are, not letting me have water when I need it so bad."

"Now Matt," he says. "Why I was on my way over to your place to offer you the use of my Spellman place, when it happened."

"When what happend?" I want to know.

"Why some outlaw held me up and stole my horse, setting me on foot. Some one who has it in for you and me and was setting out to make us enemies. Miss Slim, here, caught him in the act of putting my brand on one of your calves."

"That's right," says Slim. "I was hid in the rocks not over a hundred yards from where he tied the calf. I fired and he took off up the hill. I lost him in the rocks and later on I found Mister Norton limping along and wondering what had become of his horse."

"You mean you missed a rustler at a hundred yards?" I say. "Why I whaled the daylights out of my Johnny for missing a jackrabbit that close when he was ten years old."

"No, now, Matt," says Wes. "Don't forget Miss Slim is a young woman. A right pretty one at that. And I'm beholden to her for what she has done. In return, I'm going to start my boys combing the range for your strays. We'll start the first of next week. Why I've already bet Miss Slim ten-thousand dollars against a batch of doughnuts that we'll tally better than three hundred of your critters before we're through."

Well, you can't beat an offer like that. We talk awhile and tell each other what fine men we are and I like the way he don't try to shine up to Jingles. He plays it all the way like a good friend should. Which makes me talk up to Slim when we are about halfway home.

"You're going to get some shooting lessons, right off, young lady," I tell

her. "I'll never forgive you for missing the scoundrel who stole poor Wes' pony."

She don't say anything. Just then two hawks sail over a ridge and start down after a scared cottontail. Slim snakes her carbine out of the saddle boot faster than I've seen the sheriff draw a pistol. She shoots twice and that rabbit has two less hawks to devil him. I pull up, the wheels beginning to turn in my head.

"One could have been an accident," I say. "But hitting both of them . . . why you couldn't have missed that rustler unless you tried. You kept him from his horse on purpose. Why that two-faced, lying Wes Norton. . . ." I start back for Wes' place like my saddle was on fire. But before I get two hops, Jingles has me on one side and Slim on the other.

"Keep your shirt on, Matt," Jingles says. "It's better this way."

"You get your water," says Slim. "And you get your rightful tally of calves. Believe me, you will. I've got the evil eye on Wes Norton."

THEY talk me into it, mostly because my pony won't go any place but straight up in the air when I use my spurs, because Jingles has hold of the bit. That woman sure has a way with horses. So we head for home again, me sulking because I know they are right. As long as Slim is around, Wes Norton will jump through any hoop I hold up. And she is going to stay around. Johnny is going to marry her if I have to take a fence post to him. He needs a girl like Slim.

I get to thinking about him so much I imagine I see him angling down a ridge, dressed in his jeans and leather jacket. And when he waves his arm I almost jump out of my skin. It is Johnny. Yipeeee!

The women haven't seen him and wouldn't know him if they did so. I am a good quarter mile ahead when Johnny and me light down and start pounding the wind out of each other.

"I'm home!" he whoops. "Home for good." He backs off and wiggles his right leg. "It's not as good as it was for walking," he says. "But it will do. And will you look what's coming."

"Wait until you get a good look," I tell him. "See that one on the right? You're going to marry her. You couldn't do better."

"Marry her," he says. "Why, Dad, I'm already married."

"You're what?" I say so loud that all the cows start running for miles around. "Oh no you're not. I won't have it. I'll divorce you. Dang it all, son, why didn't you tell me?"

"Wanted to surprise you," he says. "She's the best girl in the world." And then he shoves me aside and starts running and Slim falls off her horse right into his arms. She is crying and Johnny is kissing her and smoothing back her hair and saying, "It's all right, Honey. I'm back for good. It's all over."

I sit down harder than if I had been tossed off a mean horse. That's kids for you, fooling old people that way. I'm so doggoned happy I want to cry. So I do.

After awhile, Jingles says, "There's no use staying here all night. When we get to the house I'm going to cook the biggest and best supper you ever ate."

We start out, the kids riding ahead, stirrup to stirrup with their arms around each other. It is sickening, the way they carry on. Jingles must have felt that way, too, because she does not look where she is riding and the first thing I know she lets that big sorrel walk right into my horse. I put out my hand to steady her and she grabs me

like she was afraid she was going to fall.

If those two kids would have looked back five minutes later they would have learned a thing or two. But they would never have caught us if Beaver Teeth hadn't come riding out of nowhere to yell at Johnny and point and say, "I told you he needed a head doctor. The old billgoat's acting like a bull sniffing a posey in a skypilot's flower garden."

THE END

Vignettes OF FAMOUS WESTERNERS

By GALE STEVENS

OSCEOLA—Who Fought a One Man War

IN THE dim moonlight that left the ground shadowless, the silent chiefs of the Seminole tribe gathered about the tall arrogant man in uniform. His face seemed cast in an unsmiling mold and the strength of his wiry body was nowhere more evident than in the quick, sensitive gestures of his hands. This was General Thompson of the United States Army, and his attitude bespoke his rank.

Before him stood the tawny Seminole leaders. Their faces, too, seemed cast, but in the softer, lined molds that bespeak age and worry. In this meeting lay the destiny of their tribe, and the responsibility lay heavily upon them. They seemed almost afraid.

Among them, however, was one youth who was not afraid. His body was restless and active, and his eyes flashed openly their hatred of the man in uniform. This was Osceola; the tension between he and the General seemed white hot.

The General began slowly and firmly. This treaty which he had before him, he said, was to be final and conclusive. In view of the strained relationships which had existed between the Seminole tribe and the American settlers in Florida, the government of the United States had arranged to "transplant" the tribe to prepared reservations in the West. Their signatures denoting acceptance of the terms of the treaty would complete negotiations.

Silence. The General looked up. The Indian chiefs stood there quite unmoving. They seemed hesitant.

Finally one of them spoke out. Through the interpreter he explained that his people were no longer so confident in the project. They had sent scouts to inspect the proposed reservations and only a few had returned alive. The rest were either killed by Pawnees or succumbed to the change of climate and environment. Those who had returned brought dismal reports. There were no Everglades or waterways in the West, no pith pine for the Indians' fires and torches and, worst of all, their nearest neighbors would be tribes who were their deadliest enemies.

The General was distributed by this hesitancy. He gruffly answered that all would be adjusted. The signing of this treaty was urgent, and delay was out of the question.

The Indians still held back. They could not ask their people to undertake to leave their ancestral homes with the prospect that they would be destroyed. Such a treaty would be suicide.

The General, unwilling to accept such objections, began to threaten. He became violently angry and heatedly railed against the Seminoles. If they did not sign this treaty immediately, he threatened to withdraw the aid and protection of the army. The Indians would then be regarded as outlaws to be shot on sight!

Out of the group of angry Indians leaped Osceola, his hunting knife drawn and raised. He plunged it through the treaty spread out upon the desk, and as the knife stood quivering in the wooden surface he cried out: *"This* is the only treaty we will ever make with the white men!"

This was the beginning of the Seminole War, seven years of death and strife. Looking back upon the episode we find it hard to understand or excuse the policy which was followed in regard to the Indians. Only the youthfulness and inexperience of the new government and the irresistible desire of the settlers to build and cultivate the virgin land can explain the injustice brought to the Seminoles.

They had always been on friendly terms with the British and Americans and had proven themselves valuable allies during periods of hostilities with Spain. Yet scarcely had Florida been ceded to the United States when mistreatment of the Indians commenced. Settlers and speculators robbed them of their lands and cattle, and shot them down when they protested. Their villages were burned, their women violated, their crops

seized or destroyed, and they were driven farther and farther from their ancestral homes and the fields that had been tilled by their tribes for centuries. In the eyes of the white men the Indians had no rights; they were vermin to be stamped out like rattlesnakes and moccasins; and, although there was land to spare for all, the avaricious, greedy whites preferred to take forcible possession of the Indian lands rather than clear and drain land for themselves.

At first the Indians offered little resistance. They took the injustice, turned the other cheek, and retired further into the depths of the Florida Everglades. The white men, however, were not yet satisfied and insisted that the Seminoles be deported, as if it were possible to transplant to arid plains a people accustomed and acclimated to the Florida swamps without annihilation as the inevitable result.

Yet they might even have accepted this alternative had it not been for one man. Osceola had suffered outrage at the hands of the white men, the memory of which burned in his heart as a raging fire. When his beloved wife was kidnapped he went to Fort King to ask justice from General Thompson. Instead of listening to him, however, the General ordered Osceola's arrest and had him thrown in jail and heavily chained. There in the prison, Osceola brooded and burned with the wrongs that had been done him and his people.

It was not with gratitude that he left his cell when he was finally released. His heart was filled with hate and desire for vengeance. It was this man, Osceola, who, plunging his dagger through the proposed treaty cast the die for his people in the name of Defiance.

The uprising was sudden and violent. Osceola arrived unexpectedly at Fort King and killed General Thompson and Lieutenant King, his secretary, thus avenging himself for the brutal and unjust treatment he had received at the General's hands.

The same day occurred the so-called Dade Massacre. With one hundred and ten United States regulars, Major Dade marched from Fort Brooke (now Tampa) bound for Fort King (now Ocala) where he was to join General Clinch and thence proceed to wipe out the Seminoles of the district. Hardly had the force crossed the Withlacooche River when guns flashed and roared from the surrounding jungle, the ambushed men fell dead and wounded on every side, and even Major Dade was killed. Completely surprised and terrified, 108 of the men were cut down. Only two men escaped, Private Clark of the 2nd Artillery and Private Thomas. It was Clark who crawled 60 miles to Fort Brooke to report the tragedy.

Now the fighting began in earnest. This defeat of United States regulars by a handful of Indians awakened the United States to the realization that the Seminoles were not merely turbulent malcontents to be easily rounded up by a few soldiers. Reinforcements were sent until the numbers of men stood eighteen to one in our favor.

The tactics of the Indian warriors made them extremely difficult to fight. Under their leader, Osceola, they would strike quickly at detachments and supply lines and then vanish into the dense Everglade forest. Osceola and his men were daring and speedy, and his leadership was an inspiration to all the Seminoles.

In December of 837 Colonel Zachery Taylor, later President of the United States, marched with 2,000 men for an attack on the Indians encamped at the northern end of Lake Okeechobee. The battle began on Christmas morning and lasted until late in the afternoon. When the Indians at last withdrew, Colonel Genty and twenty-six men had been killed and over one hundred wounded, while the Indian losses had been but ten men.

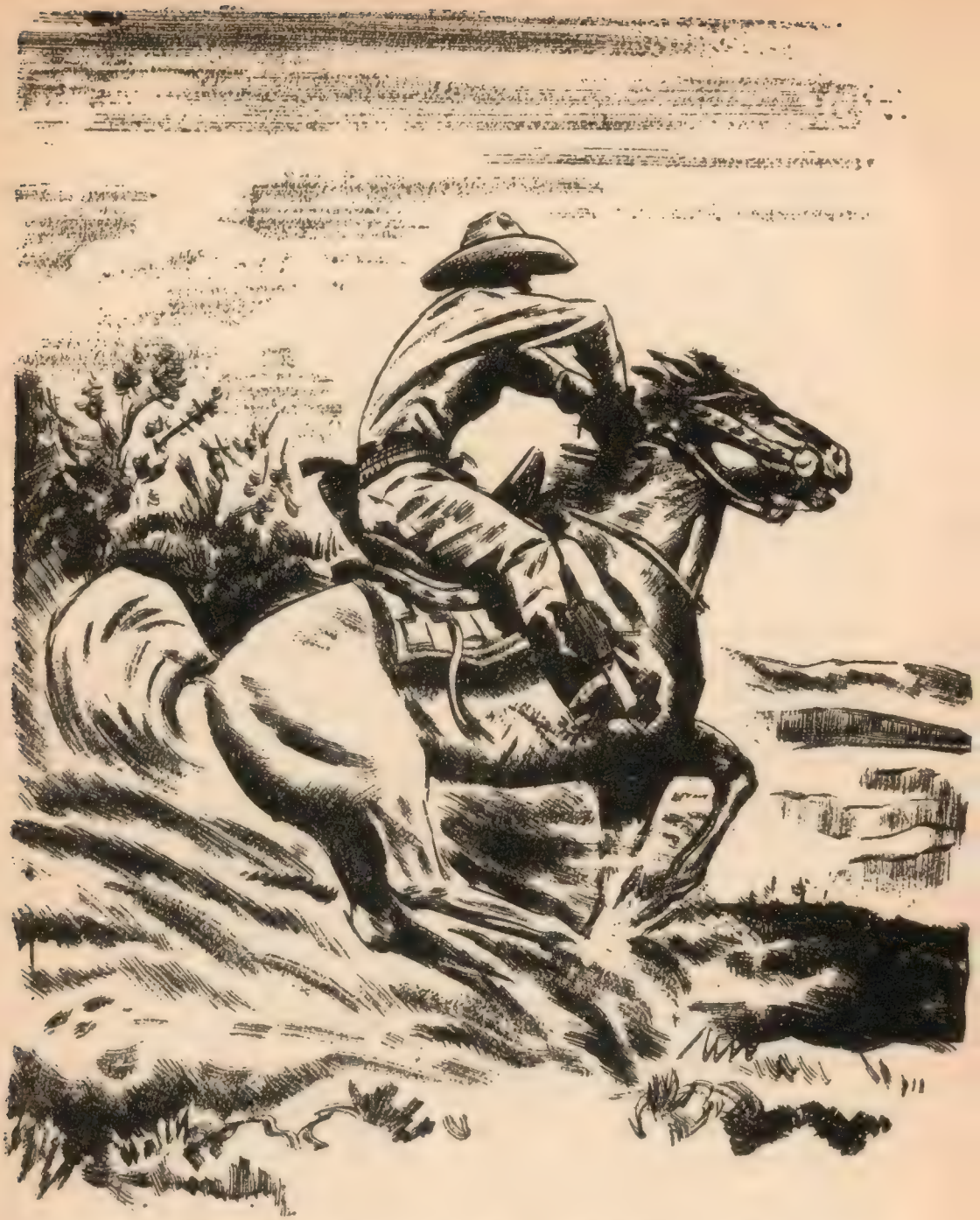
Now the battles became furious and bitter. In succeeding engagements the Indians lost heavily. Each time one of their men would fall it would be as if they had lost a hundred, for their losses could not be replaced. With the weight of our ever-increasing numbers we wore them down until they finally retreated deep into the Everglades, virtually admitting defeat. It was their desire now to live in peace. Osceola, under a flag of truce appeared at St. Augustine and requested a conference with General Hernandez. He received the audience—and was immediately seized, heavily manacled, and after a few days was sent to the dungeons of Fort Moultrie in South Carolina. This was the death-dealing treachery, for there, after months of agonizing imprisonment, Osceola died.

The Seminole War did not end, however, with the death of Osceola. Coacoochee (the Wild Cat), son of Chief Philip, was taken prisoner while visiting his sick grandfather. By starving himself until he was able to squeeze between the bars of his prison he escaped and aroused the anger of the Seminoles again. They held St. Augustine in a state of siege for more than four years while the rest of northern Florida was in terror of attack.

In 1842 the war was finally ended by the capture of Coacoochee and twenty canoes with fifty warriors at Fort Lauderdale.

Today, we look back upon the struggle with a little shame. The gallant struggle for their rights and for justice reminds us of another struggle for liberty in 1776. Never to be forgotten, we are sure, is the most noted champion of the Seminoles, Osceola. Even the whites who hated and feared him were forced to admire his courage, his patriotism, his genius, and his devotion to his people's cause. His name and fame have been perpetuated in four countries, in as many states, in addition to countless towns, cities, streets, and parks named after him, and in St. Augustine are life-sized statues of the famous warrior, together with his wife and child, while a stone pillar at Fort Moultrie bears the inscription:

Osceola
Patriot and Warrior
Died at Fort Moultrie
Jan. 30, 1838



THE sun was dropping low in the western sky when Jim Mason rode into the cowtown of Loma. And the day was hot. He drew up on the reins and pushed an old gray Stetson to the back of his head; wearily, he wiped an arm across his tanned, leanly molded face.

"Well," he thought, "here we are—trail's end!" Some of the weariness washed from Jim Mason's sensitive face. His straight wide shoulders

PEACE OFFICER OF SUNDOWN

By William G. Bogart

Because of Sue Owens, coming to Loma Should have been swell; but Jim Mason came as a peace officer on her brother's trail

The crack of a gunshot came from the horseman across the gully . . .

pushed back, and again there was an air of careless recklessness about his rangy form, a certain brightness deep in his gray eyes.

A scant half block away he saw the railroad depot, and now he turned the hammer-headed roan that way. There was, he remembered, a telegram he should be sending off to Texas. And information he had to obtain. If you wanted local gossip, Jim knew, all you had to do was see the station agent.

They were generally ready, and willing, to hand out all the local news.

A moment later he was dropping the reins over the horse's head in front of the watering trough; then he moved toward the old rickety platform that circled the weathered building. Jim flung a glance over his shoulder, and winked. "And maybe, mister," he said wistfully, "we'll find out about *her!*"

Her name had been Susan, and there had been a dance, and he thought that in all his life he would never forget the soft curve of her lips, the wonderful blue of her eyes set in a sweet face.

He thought, *"I'll never forget you. You'll always be the one."*

Two long years it had been, and during that time he had written to Sue Owens in care of General Delivery, here at Loma. Finally, some time ago, her letters had stopped coming. Perhaps while he was here on this other business, he could find her. He *had* to. Thought of never seeing Sue again somehow frightened him.

He entered the station, a tall, rangy man with an easy stride. You could tell that he had journeyed far by the look of his clothes. His steady eyes squinted a little from long hours of riding in the hot sun.

Jim Mason paused inside the station and let his eyes adjust themselves to the subdued light. Somewhere a telegraph key rattled intermittently. A fly buzzed around the quiet room. He saw no one. A mail-order catalog lay overturned on the station agent's desk.

And so he continued on through the room and toward an opposite doorway that led out to the tracks. Silver spurs jingled as he moved along the platform. Perhaps he'd find the station agent in the baggage room. . . .

JIM MASON paused, his gaze centering on the girl walking slowly up and down the platform, some distance ahead of him. She was dressed in a flowered summer dress. Her hair looked like bright coppery gold in the late afternoon sunlight. She was small and trim, and her back was toward him as she stared down the long, sweeping curve of the single spur tracks that led into the town. Perhaps she could tell him. . . .

Jim was half a dozen strides from her when she turned at the sound of his approach. He had started to say, "Pardon, ma'am, but I'd like to know where I can find—"

And he stared. And his heart did funny things. It was suddenly pounding. "Sue!" he gasped. "Sue Owens!"

In the moment that she turned, he noticed that she had been biting her lower lip. She appeared upset about something. But now that was gone. Her lovely eyes brightened and she came toward him with outstretched, slim hands.

"Jim!" she said with a disbelieving little cry.

It was good, holding her hands again, looking down into the brightness of her warm, fine face. She was small and slim and beautiful, and about her there was something that made him think, *"She's just like that night two years ago."*

"Remember me?" he asked, grinning. His voice was gay.

"Remember! Jim, I've never forgotten for a moment!" Her hands went to his arm and she steered him toward one of the wooden benches. "Let me see . . ." she said thoughtfully, and her eyes took on a faraway look. "It was June, and I had just arrived home from school back East. There was a dance at The Pines, and you walked up to me and said, 'Lady, can you spare a dance?' I'd never seen you before in my life!"

Jim nodded, his smoky gray eyes

alight. "And they played *Stardust.*"

Sue was laughing. "Remember riding into town later for beer and barbecues? It was dawn when you took me home—"

"We had a race right down Main Street," he said, grinning. "We woke up all the neighbors!"

Sue's eyes were bright with her laughter. "And Tony won." A question was suddenly in her eyes. "You've still got Tony?"

He stood up. "Come here," he said. He led the way around the platform to the other side of the station. And Sue gave a little cry of gladness when she saw the big roan. She ran up to the horse and put her arms around his waiting sleek neck. She turned and looked at Jim.

"I've thought of him so often since that night."

Jim Mason made a face, though the gayness was still in his gray eyes. He addressed the horse. "You see, boy, women are fickle. They never know ——"

Sue said quietly, "I've thought of you, too, Jim."

His eyes searched her lovely face soberly now. He had his dusty Stetson in his hand. He pushed back a lock of sandy-colored hair that had a habit of drooping over his right eyebrow.

He said, "Two months ago I got your last letter. Then they stopped coming. I thought maybe you'd forgotten."

She shook her head. "No, Jim," she said quickly. "I didn't forget." Her eyes clouded. "But Dad has been ill. We feared it was cancer, and so I took him to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. I was up there. I just got back two days ago and found your letters."

For the first time he was aware of a worried expression in the depths of her blue eyes. And she looked a little tired. He said, feelingly, "I'm sorry to hear that. Is he bad?"

"No," Sue said. "It wasn't cancer after all. He'll get better. But he'll have to stay there awhile. . . ." Her words dropped low.

Jim understood. "And that'll take money," he said. He realized now what was troubling her.

But she said, "It isn't only that. We've also had trouble in the valley. On the free ranges rustlers have been cutting brands out of the herds. A number of ranchers have lost cattle. It's been getting worse. And there have been some killings. . . ."

She stopped, making an impatient gesture. "I'm getting morbid." She smiled again. "Let's talk about you! Tell me everything!"

THEY stepped back into the shade of the station waiting room. They stood there facing each other, and Jim felt excitement surge through him. He guessed there was no girl quite as lovely and sweet as Sue Owens.

He told her, "I've done everything. I got a job as derrick devil down Texas way. That's why I had to leave so suddenly, because my brother had an opening all lined up for me. And I punched some cows, and later I joined the—"

They both turned as a man entered the station.

He was a small wiry man with half bowed legs and close-cropped, dark-gray hair that looked like steel wool. A green eye-shade was pushed back on his bony forehead.

Sue said, "This is Sparky Smith, the station agent." The nervous little man jerked his head as he was introduced to Jim Mason.

The girl asked Sparky Smith, "What's the matter with Number 4? It's half an hour late now."

The thin little man said, "Five min-

utes an' she'll be here. Like I always say, you can never tell about trains. Now tomorrow she might be—"

Sue turned partly toward Jim and winked. The man prattled on like an old woman. Jim cut in on his words and said, "We'll wait outside, huh?"

Sparky was still talking as they went back to the platform.

He noticed the somewhat taut expression that came to Sue's pretty face as her gaze went unconsciously down the tracks. He said, "Sue, you're worried. I can tell. If there's anything I can do——"

She looked up at him. Words came swiftly. "Jim, there's something I've got to tell you. It's about my brother."

He waited, his eyes searching her face.

"It's . . . well, he's been in trouble!" Sue blurted. "About a year ago Danny got in with a bad crowd here in town. One night some of the ranchers found a silver spur after there had been a gun fight with rustlers." Sue's eyes lowered. "It . . . it was Danny's."

"You mean," he asked quietly, "you think Danny was in with the rustlers?"

Sue made a hopeless gesture. "There were other things—clues that indicated Danny was one of the crowd. There have been killings and shootings, nothing but trouble in the valley for the last year. The men behind the crimes have never been caught."

"And Danny?" Jim prompted gently.

Sue gave a little gasp of dismay. "Disappeared completely!" she said. "We've tried to trace him." Jim saw the hint of a tear on her long lashes as she looked at him. "I still think he's innocent. I'll always believe it! But until he's found——"

The words trailed off.

He said solicitously, "I guess it's been kind of tough, what with your father sick and all. I'd like to help——"

HER hand rested on his arm, and even the nearness of this lovely girl sent a tremor racing through him. "Thanks, Jim," she murmured. Then, "We had to give up temporarily, the ranch, of course. We lost three hundred head of steer in one season. So mother and I took over this rooming house on the outskirts of town. If it wasn't for that——"

He said cheerfully, "Well, you've got another boarder."

Sue was smiling again. "It'll be nice having you!"

In the distance, a train whistle shrilled on the still, warm air. He saw Sue tense. "Expecting somebody?" he asked.

Her face brightened. "Clint Mortimer's due in on this train," she told him. "Clint's been up to Chicago on business. And he had an idea Danny might be there. He was going to ask around at some of the places where ranchers hang out while in the city."

"Is this Clint Mortimer a rancher, too?"

She nodded. "The biggest in the valley. The family has known him for quite a few years. Everyone knows Clint."

Jim expected to see a man who was along in years. He was surprised a few moments later when the two-coach train pulled in and Sue, with a glad cry, ran toward the man who swung down off the steps.

"Clint!" Sue said. In the next momoment the man's arm was around her slim shoulder. They were busy talking.

Jim stood back, studying the arrival. Clint Mortimer was a big, thick-chested man with a shock of black hair and deep, penetrating eyes. He had a broad smile and was—Jim guessed—what women would call handsome. His entire manner, his clothes, indicated that he was a man of wealth.

Jim caught the shake of Clint Mortimer's head. At the same time he saw the despair that was plain in Sue's eyes. He could guess what the announcement had been. There had been no word of her brother. And he was thinking, *"I've got to help her. I've got to!"*

She turned, called, "Jim! I want you to meet an old friend——"

In the next moment, he was shaking hands with the big rancher. Clint Mortimer abruptly turned back toward the train steps, saying, "Where in time is Lucille——"

JUST then the dark-haired girl with the trimly tailored figure appeared on the platform above them. An expensively shod, dainty foot pushed a traveling bag toward the top of the steps, and the girl said, "Darling, help me with these bags. I'm having the awfulest time!"

Another bag followed. Another. Jim stepped swiftly forward to help the rancher with the dark-haired girl's luggage. She followed down the steps, and in the next moment introductions were being made.

Lucille Morrison was expensively dressed, and as sleek and as beautiful as a—well, as a thoroughbred race horse, Jim Mason thought.

He heard Clint Mortimer saying, "And so tonight we're having a little party, Sue. We want you to come out." He looked at the dark-haired girl. "Lucille is down for a visit with Mary. She'll be here sometime——"

And Lucille was moving to Jim Mason's side. She was exclaiming liquidly, "I think he's nice!"—looking at him. She turned to Clint. "Is this the friend you were telling me about?"

Jim saw Sue's face, the tightness that was abruptly around her sweet mouth. He said, face flushing, "Look, ma'am, I guess you're sort of mistaking me for somebody else——"

Laughing, Clint Mortimer said, "No, Lucille, he's not the one. But Mr. Mason is welcome to come tonight. I had someone else in mind for you——"

They were interrupted by the arrival of a buckboard which had just been driven up to the edge of the old station platform. The wagon was drawn by a pair of beautiful bays which must have cost a pretty penny, Jim thought, as his approving eye flashed over them. A man hopped down from the buckboard.

"Here we are," said Clint Mortimer. He looked at Sue. "Can we give you a lift?"

She shook her head. "I've got a horse waiting over at the livery stable. Besides——" She looked toward Jim Mason. "Jim and I were just talking about somthing—"

Clint Mortimer grinned good-naturedly. "I get it. Well, we'll be seeing you tonight, then. Come on, Lucille."

The driver was already loading their bags aboard. But sleek Lucille Morrison turned back, held out her hand to Jim, said throatily, "You *will* be there, won't you? And her tone said a lot more than that.

He said something, but the words were forgotten the moment Lucille had departed. He looked at Sue, and his gray eyes were questioning. "You didn't hear anything about your brother?"

She shook her head. "Clint didn't learn a thing." Her voice was suddenly dull. "Oh, Jim, sometimes I wonder if mother and I can go on like this, never knowing where Danny is, never knowing what's happening to him. He isn't guilty. He isn't! And yet some day, anytime, we're liable to hear that he's been shot down by some law officer. Perhaps a bullet in his back—"

Sue did not see the swift, strained

look that flashed across his face as they started across the street toward the livery stable. He thought, *"I'll have to tell her. I'll have to tell her soon!"*

Aloud, he said brightly, "It'll turn out all right. Look, I'm half starved. And I need a bath. And—"

Sue looked at him, smiling again. "She *was* pretty, wasn't she?"

"Who?" he said.

"Lucille, of course. I think she liked you, Jim."

He said, "Oh!" sort of vaguely. And added, *"Oh,* you mean Lucille! wasn't thinking of her." The reckless, half grin was on his lean face again. "Or did you want me to?"

Her arm was suddenly linked through his now. She said warmly, "Let's forget I mentioned it, Jim."

THEY rode out of town together, and for the time being they did not talk about her trouble, about Danny Owens. He tried to be gay and carefree, because this was the way he had remembered her. And he prayed that things would straighten out so that she could be that way again. She was the kind of a girl who should have laughter in her eyes and a song in her heart.

They followed a ridge road that led toward the valley. Far away, in the distance, a purple haze had settled against the mountains. It was the hour of dusk, and in the air was a hint of coolness as darkness settled down. Just past the edge of town they came to the next house set back beneath tall, spreading elms. There was a sign on the white fence that faced the road. It read:

ROOMS AND BOARD

A few moments later he had met Sue's mother, a sweet frail woman with tired eyes that told of a deep sadness. She immediately took charge of him.

"Dear me," she said worriedly, "you look plumb tuckered out. I'll get you some supper, and you'll need some towels, and——"

Sue said, laughing, "You're one of mother's boys now, Jim. She'll fuss over you like everything." She moved toward the dining room. "The rest of the men have already eaten. We're late. Heavens, I hope they've left something!"

Later—he had bathed and shaved and felt like ten million dollars—he was back in the neat, small room on the second floor of the house. He had been two weeks on the trail, and he thought it was going to be swell sleeping in a clean, fresh bed again. He opened one of his saddle bags and started unpacking some clean clothes. He laid things out on the bed.

He was just knotting a tie beneath the collar of his clean checkered shirt when Sue knocked on the door.

"Supper's ready, Jim."

He opened the door. Sue stood in the doorway of the room. "It's me, remember?" he said, the easy grin on his bronzed features. He was slicking down the unruly lock of sandy-colored hair that persisted on falling across his eye.

"There's a startling resemblance to someone I know," Sue said, cocking her head and looking at him. "I would almost say——" She paused, her gaze veering to the bed. She saw the pair of pearl-handled .44 Colts and holsters that had been placed there. But this wasn't what held her rigid gaze. It was the peace marshal's badge that lay on the bed alongside the guns. The emblem of a Texas Ranger!

Her startled eyes came to his. She said, "Then you . . . you're a sheriff, Jim?"

He nodded. "Sheriff . . . peace officer . . . the entire law force of Sundown, Texas." His smoke-gray eyes flickered. "Yes," he admitted, "and also a Texas Ranger."

And all the time he was thinking, *"Why is she so frightened? Why does she look at me like that?"*

"Then . . . you really came up this way looking for someone . . . for a man?" Her voice was tense.

He said easily, "I came seeking you. You're the one." But he added seriously, "Yes, there is a person I'm hunting. A man wanted in Texas. A pal of mine . . . my best friend . . . was shot. He died. We had a tip that the trail led to Loma. So I asked for leave, figuring I'd combine the two missions. Finding him. Seeing you . . ."

"But you *are* searching for a murderer?" Sue prodded.

HE NODDED, and for the barest instant his face was grim. "It might take a long while. We only know this person by name, and it's a bad one. But somewhere I'll find this fellow. I guess a lot of people in the Southwest have heard of him by now. You see——"

"What is his name?" Sue said.

"The Border Kid. That's the only name we know him by. Some day, somewhere, I'll learn who the real man is——"

He paused, realizing that Sue was staring at him oddly. "Sue, *what's wrong?"* he exclaimed.

She had taken a step backward. Sue was leaning against the door jamb, shoulders pressed against the frame as though she needed something for support. Her slim hand went to her throat. Jim saw her eyes, the terrible horror that was in them.

"Sue! Sue, what is it?"

She kept staring at him. Finally words faltered from her lips. She said in a breathless whisper. "The Border Kid! That's what they've been saying. They insist it is the name he goes under——"

"Who?" He was tense.

"My brother!"

CHAPTER II

BEFORE he could utter a word, before he could tell Sue how he felt, her mother was calling from the foot of the stairs. Supper was getting cold, she said.

As they headed for the stairs, Sue flashed him a quick warning look. "I won't tell mother who you really are," she whispered. "If she knew you were looking for . . . for *him* . . . "

He nodded silently. They went down the stairs.

And all the time he was thinking, *"Why did this terrible thing have to happen to us? Why did I have to be the one who came here looking for her brother?"*

He ate mechanically. Sue sat across the table from him. He was acutely conscious that she avoided his eyes. There was a paleness in her lovely face now . . .

He looked up. Mrs. Owens was saying, "My goodness, so you're Jimmy Mason. I've heard so much about you." There was a little brightness in the woman's eyes now. "Sue told me about the nice evening you two had together, when you were last here. She showed me some of your letters . . ."

"Mother!" Sue cried. Color rushed back into her cheeks. "You really shouldn't——"

"I was telling Sue she must certainly go to Clint's party tonight," Mrs. Owens went on. "It'll do her good. She's been working so hard since we gave up the ranch." Her eyes clouded,

"I suppose Sue has told you about the wave of rustlings and killings in the valley?"

He nodded.

"If Dad were only here," the woman said, "he might lead the small-spreaders to some sort of organization. Single-handed, they haven't been able to fight the raiders alone. Strays are falsely branded. Entire herds are stolen. And it will be another six weeks before Dad can come home." There was a slight hesitation, a catch in her voice as she added, "And with Danny . . . away, we've had to carry on alone."

Mrs. Owens was standing behind her daughter. She looked across the table and said hopefully, "Perhaps you'd like to take charge out at the ranch. We left a couple of the boys out there when we moved to town." She smiled. "I've heard so much about you. You look like a man capable of handling those terrible rustlers and killers."

His eyes met Sue's. Standing behind her, Mrs. Owens could not see the strained expression that was on her daughter's tense face. The thought hit him abruptly. *"Her mother doesn't know. She doesn't know about her son. They haven't told her!"*

He said, "Thank you, Mrs. Owens. I'll think it over. I'd have to make some . . . changes in my plans."

Sue abruptly pushed back her chair. She stood up. "I'll have to get ready . . ." she started to say, then hesitated. She looked at her mother. "I really shouldn't leave you—"

"Of course you're going," Mrs. Owens insisted. "You're going to have a good time. Jim, here, will see to that."

Later, they rode through the moonlight night—Jim and Sue—each silent, his own brain throbbing as he thought of this situation that had come between them. *Why did it have to happen to us? Why?* He had come up here from Texas to find a murderer. And also . . . to find her again, this girl that he instinctively knew would be the only woman in his life. And now . . . her brother, the Border Kid, wanted for murder. The man, he, himself, was seeking!

Sue was saying, "It's only a short ride. Clint's ranch spreads over half the valley, but the main house isn't far from town." She fell silent again.

THERE was the gentle creak of saddle leather as they rode, and the night was warm and silent and vast. The stars had come out and now hung like bright diamonds against the rich blue velvet of the sky.

Jim glanced sidewise at the girl riding beside him. She was like a picture; buckskin riding skirt and bright blouse; a gay colored kerchief tied about her coppery gold hair.

He said, "Sue?"

"Yes?" She did not look at him.

"About your brother. Perhaps there has been a mistake. It's possible that he isn't the Border Kid at all."

She was silent for two long moments. Then her words came so softly that he hardly heard them. "I had hoped that. But now, after what you said before we ate tonight, it must be true. Danny was in Texas. We heard that. He could have been the one who mur—who shot your friend!"

"But we're not sure," he said quietly.

She drew up on the reins, looked at him. "No, we're not sure," she said tensely. "That's the awful thing about it—we're not *certain!*" Her trembling voice sounded just a shade hysterical.

"Sue——" he started.

But she raced on, "We'll never know until the Border Kid is captured. I'll never know until then." She looked at him steadily. "Your best friend was

murdered. It's your job to find the man who killed him. I . . . I wouldn't admire you if you *didn't* search for him. Eventually you will find him. I know. You're that kind of man, Jim. And——"

There was a catch in her voice. He leaned across to her, caught her hand. "Sue, you're making it hard for both of us. Perhaps everything will turn out all right——"

She shook her head determinedly. "Don't you see, Jim, we don't *know*. Perhaps he is the Border Kid. Perhaps you'll catch him. And when you do, when you bring him back——" A sob escaped her lips. "Oh, don't you *see*, Jim? Even if Danny is the one, I love him. He's my brother. And——"

She stopped. He had an idea what she had been going to say. His arm went suddenly around her, as he leaned over, and he said huskily, "Sue, Sue, honey, you're only making yourself miserable!"

He felt the soft fragrance of her hair against his face, the tenseness of her slim form. He held her close, and his heart was pounding.

Sue looked up into his eyes, her face gardenia-pale and delicate in the moonlight. He saw the mistiness of deep blue eyes.

"Jim!" she said with a little cry.

His lips found hers, and held, and time stopped for a wonderful moment that he wished could be eternity. Then her slim hands were against his chest and she was pushing back from him. "Jim, please!"

And he was saying, "Sue! Sue, honey, that's the way I want it to be—forever and ever!"

THERE was misery in her lovely misted eyes as she looked at him. She gasped, "No, Jim. It can't go on like this. It can't!"

He stared, amazed. "But——"

"Look," she said swiftly. "Don't you see how it might end? You might be the one who finds Danny. You'll bring him back, a killer! You'll be the man responsible for his arrest. And yet I love him so. He's just a boy. I——"

He said, "I'll quit. I'll send back the shield and tell them I'm no longer a Texas Ranger. I'll give up the chase——"

"No, Jim," Sue was saying quietly. "I'd never ask you to do that. The man who was killed was your friend, and you vowed to get the one who murdered him. If you gave up now, if you turned your back on that task, it would be on your conscience forever. Some day . . . sometime . . . you'd hate yourself. You would even hate . . . me!"

"Sue!" he choked out.

She picked up the reins. Her chin came up firmly, and she said quietly, "Jim, let's not talk about it anymore tonight." She attempted a bright smile. "Just for tonight, we'll forget. And tomorrow, you can go away; you can continue your mission—"

He said nothing, but he was thinking, *"Yes, tomorrow you will go away. And you'll never see her again. You'll sooner or later catch up with the Border Kid and . . . and she'll never see you again."*

He straightened his broad shoulders and grinned suddenly. "Yes," he agreed, "tonight is ours." His arm swept in an arc, indicating the warm, soft night all around them, endless and silent and moon-bright. "Two years ago it was a night like this, remember?"

Sue's eyes flashed. "It was glorious." She forked the horse. "Come on," she called back. "I'll race you to Clint's place."

He prodded the roan. They were racing through the night, hoofbeats

drumming the earth. His heart was pounding, too. He let out a cowboy whoop. He sent the horse following after her own fast pony.

And he was riding with an ache in his heart.

THERE was a crowd at Clint Mortimer's ranch-house. People from town, girls, punchers from the wealthy cowman's own vast spread—the Double Diamond.

Clint Mortimer—big, sure of himself, darkly handsome—was at Sue's side almost the moment they entered the spreading well-furnished house. His arm was already around her, and it struck Jim that it was not exactly a fatherly embrace.

"Sue, darling," Clint Mortimer said warmly, "I've been waiting for you. I've been wanting to dance with you. It's been a long time, you know."

Jim stiffened. There was something about the way Clint talked to her, something about the intenseness of the man's eyes. Maybe he had known her since she was a young girl, but his regard was not the kind an older man usually gives a girl. Sue had told Jim that Clint was a widower. Perhaps . . .

His thoughts were interrupted as Clint turned toward him and said easily, "Oh, hello there, Mason. Lucille's been looking for you—" He looked across the crowded room, called, "Mary, come here a moment."

Mary Mortimer, his daughter, was a tall, quiet-looking girl who seemed out of place here. There was a deep thoughtfulness in her gray eyes.

Mortimer said, "Mary, this is Jim Mason. Lucille's looking for him inside." He nodded toward a big library across the wide hallway, from whence came the sound of a string dance orchestra. "She thinks this fellow is pretty nice. Find her, will you?"

The girl led him across the hallway. People moved in and out of the sprawling, big rooms. The house was like Clint Mortimer himself—big and plainly showing that money had been spent on it. Jim looked back, saw Clint guiding Sue away from a part of the crowd.

The girl at Jim Mason's side remarked, "I imagine Lucille is doing all right. She usually does."

He looked at Mary Mortimer's quiet, reserved face. "You don't seem to be having a good time," he said.

The girl's eyes met his a moment. "I'm not," she stated, frankly.

A frown creased his bronzed features. They had paused just inside the doorway of the long room. Rugs had been rolled back; there was laughter and music and couples dancing near them. He indicated this and said, "I don't see why—"

Mary Mortimer said, "Tonight is just a brief breathing spell from their troubles. There have been shootings and nothing but hard times in the valley. I spent four years in the East. Sometimes I think I shall go back there."

She was a strange girl, Jim thought. And yet she was sincere and deep and full of feeling.

She went on abruptly, "There is only one thing that keeps me here. I take pictures. There is beauty in that."

"Pictures?"

She nodded. "Come along with me a moment."

MARY MORTIMER led the way to a small study located at the rear of the house. Beautiful color-photographs of the rangeland, of the mountains, hung in frames on the walls. He exclaimed, "They're splendid!"

For the first time, her eyes lighted. "I took up photography in New York," she told him. "I thought it would be

beautiful, starting a western collection when I came back here." The troubled expression was in her eyes again. "But everywhere you go in the valley, you find this menace of cattle rustlers and marauders. People are not happy. They're not *safe*. Last week, Mart Banning—a small-spreader—was shot in the back." Her voice was swiftly tense. "I *hate* it here sometimes!"

"I don't wonder," he said quietly.

She looked at him. "I've known Sue Owens for years. She's a sweet girl. I wonder sometimes if she doesn't feel the same way I do. Their ranch—the Circle O—suffered as much as the other spreads. Cattle disappeared. Riders were dry-gulched." She hesitated. "And now, with her brother gone . . ."

Jim asked flatly, "*Is* her brother the Border Kid?"

"They say he is. The ranchers tried to keep it quiet. But word got around. Sue found out. And . . . and it's breaking her heart." She met his eyes again. Her own were level and frank. "There's something . . ."

She stopped, as though changing her mind about the thing she'd been going to say. She went on, "The raiders have a hideout in the Owlhoot Hills, across the valley. No peace officer has ever returned from there alive."

Jim frowned. "Certainly a posse should be able to——"

"Sheriff Ben Sutton has tried that, too. But so far, the raiders are still free."

In the doorway behind them Lucille Morrison said in her silky voice, "Oh, there you are! I've been looking all over for this man. Imagine knowing a Texas Ranger!"

Jim gave a start. His eyes went from Lucille's smoothly beautiful face to Mary Mortimer. And he saw that Mary Mortimer herself was surprised by the announcement that he was a Ranger.

"I didn't know!" she said.

He looked at Lucille again. He had not wanted anyone to know that he was here in Loma looking for a murderer. He felt that resentment might be built up against him. But now . . .

"How did you know?" he asked.

She smiled. She came across the study and put her hand on his arm. "Heavens, it seems to be general news. Several of the boys told me." Then, her dark eyes on his face, "Dance with me!"

He looked toward Mary Mortimer. She smiled. "That's all right." But just before he reached the doorway, she added seriously, "What we were talking about . . . perhaps *you* could help them. That is, being a Ranger and all—"

He nodded, and went out.

Dancing with sleek Lucille Morrison, he was hardly aware of the lithe slimness of her graceful figure. He was thinking how odd it was that men here at the party already knew who he was. Someone in the town had told them he was a peace officer . . .

THEY were just dancing past screened doors that led to a wide veranda when Lucille's slim arm dropped from his shoulder and she said liquidly, "It's stuffy in here. Let's take a walk."

And because he wanted to get out into the night and think, he agreed. They reached the veranda, walked the length of one side of the house. The porch surrounded three sides of the big ranch-house.

Near one end of the porch, Lucille paused, looked at him and said, "What's wrong with Mary?"

He was surprised at the change which had come over her. She was no longer trying to be seductive or clever or sleek.

Her eyes were very serious.

"What do you mean?" Jim asked.

"You know what I mean. There's something on her mind, I can tell. She's not happy, and there's something else—"

She broke off, touching his arm. Her dark eyes went to the end of the veranda and her attention centered on a voice talking there.

It was big Clint Mortimer's voice, and he was saying,

". . . and so I'm asking you now, Sue. I know how tough things have been for you. I could help. We could restock your ranch, for instance. You wouldn't lose it . . ." His voice lowered, and Jim had to strain to catch what Clint was saying. He caught, "I've been wanting to ask you to marry me for a long time, Sue . . ."

There was a pause. Silence.

Jim heard Sue's taut words, "Clint, please!" Her voice sounded frightened.

Jim took a quick step forward, peered into the shadows beyond the corner in the porch. He saw big Clint Mortimer with his arm around Sue. But she was straining away from him, her golden head flung back, small hands pushed against his chest.

A tense feeling rippled through Jim's nerves. His hands clenched. He started forward again . . .

And Lucille gripped his arm, urged him back. She whispered, "No. Don't let Clint know you saw him!"

He looked at her. He saw her eyes, and he gave a slight start. There was deep hurt now in the depths of her dark eyes. Her beautiful face was strained. He thought suddenly, "She loves him! She loves Clint!"

He started to say, "I'm sorry. I didn't know——"

There was abrupt commotion from inside the house. Men were talking loudly. Someone called, "Clint! Hey, Clint!"

Jim took Lucille's arm and moved quickly away from the corner of the porch. He was thinking of Sue. It had not been his intention to spy on her. He felt guilty. And so if she saw him there now——

Men were suddenly boiling out onto the veranda, and there was excitement and noisy confusion. Jim and the girl with him were just part of the tight knot of excited people when Sue and Clint Mortimer appeared from around the other side of the porch.

"Clint!" someone explained. "It's the Owlhoot gang of raiders! They broke into the bank. Shot a deputy and blew up the safe. Sheriff Sutton's forming a posse. He needs men!"

The easy-going smile vanished from big Clint Mortimer's face. He looked at a man who must have been one of his cowhands. "Get a horse saddled. Hurry up!" Then he was giving hurried directions to others. He was abruptly all action and grimness.

A tall, lanky waddy looked at Jim Mason. He said, "Hey, you're a peace officer! How about helping out?"

Men were suddenly looking at Jim Mason. "Sure," someone added, "we could use a Texas Ranger!"

Jim hesitated. His eyes searched over the crowd for Sue. And he heard Clint Mortimer ask, "Have they any idea who was leading those raiders?"

A BIG, heavyset man with steel-gray hair and hawklike features stepped out of the group. "Yeah," he said promptly, "Sparky Smith, the station agent, saw them riding out of town. Says the Border Kid was leading them!"

Jim gave a start. He stood back as men ran toward the corrals. Within a moment grim-jawed riders were

swinging up to the front of the ranchhouse. Someone brought along a saddled bay gelding for Clint Mortimer. The rancher moved toward the waiting group of men.

A rider called to Jim Mason, "Coming along, fella?"

They were waiting for him. How they had learned he was a peace officer was a question—but the fact remained, they *knew*. If he didn't join them now they would mark him down as yellow, afraid . . .

Jim's tense gaze swung, saw Sue standing back half out of sight. He moved swiftly to her side. If her brother had been involved in this newest raid, and they caught him . . .

He said tightly, "Sue, I——"
is it?"

She looked up at him. Her trembling hands were suddenly on his arms, and she said, "Go with them. I wouldn't ask you not to! If it's Danny . . . then I'll know. Perhaps it will be better that way!"

He looked at her, at the sweet curve of her lovely face, at her troubled eyes. "Sue," he said gently, "having you care for me means more than anything—"

Her hands tensed on his arms. "I *want* you to go!" she said firmly.

Behind them, approaching the porch, was the sound of clopping hoofs. A rider drew rein near the group of waiting men. Everyone turned to look at him.

And everyone stared.

Standing, the arrival would be very tall and very slender. He wore a colorful Mexican jacket that was very short-waisted. His close-fitting trousers were sleek black, as was the beautiful stallion that he rode His buckskin gloves were white. Jim surmised that the man was part Mexican, part Spanish. There was a loose recklessness about the way he sat easily in the saddle. His vest was trimmed with silver.

Very white teeth flashed in a warmly sensitive face as the fellow swept off a black Mexican hat. He bowed low from his slim waist.

"Greetings, *señors,*" he said. His dark, lively eyes searched the waiting group, went to the women standing on the porch. His smile flashed again. "I am seeking the *señorita* Owens. She ees here, *si?*"

Jim glanced from the dashing-looking arrival's dark, handsome features to Sue, standing on the porch. She look puzzled. Obviously, she did not know the man.

She came forward, said, "Yes? What is it?"

The man swung smoothly from the black. He was well over six feet. He had a thin, neat black mustache. He bowed again and swept his sombrero past his knees.

He said smoothly, "I am Don Pedro, *señorita.* If it ees possible, I would like a word with you . . . alone."

For just an instant, Sue's eyes went to Jim's face. She looked uncertain. Then she said to the others waiting, "You'd better hurry. They need you in town."

And to Jim Mason, "I'll follow along in a few moments. Go with them, Jim."

Someone said, "Yeah, Mason. Are you coming along or not?"

He turned toward them. He saw Clint Mortimer frowning as he sat astride his bay. Clint was watching the man who called himself Don Pedro. Then the rancher swung and snapped at those waiting, "Let's go!"

Jim Mason hurried toward the corrals. A moment later he was following. And his smoky gray eyes were troubled as, once, he glanced back toward the house.

Sue was standing there talking earn-

estly to the tall, dashingly attired Don Pedro.

CHAPTER III

LOMA'S main street, near the one-story building over which was the sign: NATIONAL BANK, boiled with excited men. Ranchers were arriving from various parts of the valley; the word had swiftly spread about this newest raid by unknown marauders.

Horses breathed heavily, straining against saddle cinches. A man, on foot, pushed into the crowd and said shrilly, "It was them, all right. And the Border Kid was with them! I heard someone call him. But they were all masked . . ."

Jim Mason heeled his roan and moved forward to get a better look at the speaker. It was skinny, nervous-looking Spark Smith, the station agent.

He frowned, watching the man excitedly tell about the robbery. A crowd was around the bank door. People were inside. A man was hurt in there, they said. Jim had heard someone say that the son of the bank president had been working late. The raiders had shot him. He was in a pretty bad way . . .

But for the moment Jim Mason was intensely interested in thin-faced Sparky Smith. He was thinking, *I sent that telegram from the station. He's the only one who possibly knows who I am . . . outside of Sue.*

And Sue would not have revealed the fact that he was a Texas Ranger. She had not even wanted her mother to know. Then why had Sparky . . .

Big Clint Mortimer, his dark eyes flashing, strode out of the bank. He looked at the waiting men.

"Where's Sheriff Ben Sutton? Why the blazes isn't he around when something like this happens?"

A man answered, "Ben's out of town, Clint. Been gone a couple of days."

A murmur ran through the crowd of tense, restless riders. A rancher remarked, "Ben Sutton's yellow. He hadn't been able to handle this trouble. We've got to take the law into our own hands."

The crowd around the bank entrance suddenly fell back. Two waddies carrying a limp figure between them came out of the door and started hurriedly down the street. "That's Emil," someone said. "They're taking him down to Doc Turner's. There's a bullet in his back!"

There were angry murmurs from the waiting men. "Let's get started," a man suggested. "What the hell are we waiting for?"

Clint Mortimer held up a big hand. "Wait!" He turned to skinny little Sparky Smith. "You saw them, Sparky. What way did they go when they rode out of town? Toward the hills?"

The station agent jerked his head. "Naw." He pointed. "They rode north, the whole shebang of them. I figure they're headin' toward Black Notch."

Clint Mortimer nodded. "Okay." He spoke to several ranchers. "Ollie will go with you. Take a dozen men. Comb every canyon north of White Creek. Hurry!"

With a shout, riders forked their horses and got under way.

Clint Mortimer turned and looked at Jim Mason. "Mister," he prodded, "how well do you know the country south of here?"

Jim said quietly, "That's the way I came here. Guess I'd remember the parts down yonder pretty well."

"All right," Clint rapped. "You're a law officer. Take some of these men and search the Owlhoot Hills. The raiders *might* have gone that way!" He turned to address some of the others,

organizing groups, getting townsmen and punchers and small-spreaders started on the search for bandits.

JIM MASON selected several men and pushed forward through the curtain of alkali dust that lay heavy over the main street. Horses snorted. Saddle leather creaked as riders started out.

They had barely started when Jim Mason drew in, his glance noting something. He looked at the half dozen riders with him. "You're going to take that left fork out of town, right?"

They nodded.

"I'll catch up with you," Jim said swiftly. "I've got to see someone a moment."

The men looked at him curiously, then shrugged and moved on. Jim whirled his horse, headed back along the dust-clouded street. At the deserted hitching rail outside the hotel, he swung from the saddle and quickly ducked across the street.

The vague movement he had noted, a moment earlier, was the figure of a man—a man obviously trying to keep out of sight. He had cut back behind the hotel, following the shadows back there.

Quietly, Jim followed, keeping to those same shadows himself. He saw the man some distance ahead, slipping from the rear of one store to the next.

It was wiry little Sparky Smith.

THERE was a black rectangle that was a doorway. Sparky Smith disappeared inside. Jim reached the doorway entrance a moment later. Noiselessly, he stepped into the dark hallway.

The smell of stale beer reached his sensitive nostrils. Ahead, somewhere in the gloom, a door had closed. Then he heard Sparky Smith saying tensely, "What are you going to do about that damned Texas Ranger? We gotta be careful. You aren't kidding those fellows!"

Someone answered. The voice was low, subdued, and he could hardly catch the words. "Don't worry about him. He's going to walk right into something I've got planned for him." There was a short, brittle laugh.

Jim Mason felt his blood boil. His eyes narrowed as he listened. He kept edging along the dark hallway, trying to locate the room from which the voices were coming.

Sparky Smith was saying, "That other guy . . . that fellow who called himself Don Pedro . . ."

There was an exclamation. The second man's words were barely audible. But Jim Mason caught, "You know who he is, don't you?"

"No," said the station agent.

The voice of the second man dropped still lower. Jim could not catch what he said. But there was an exclamation of surprise from the station agent.

Then a chair scraped. Someone was leaving a room down the hall. A door opened and light angled into the hallway for a moment.

Jim Mason swiftly ducked beneath a stairway that led to rooms above. He pressed back into the shadows. He got a quick glimpse of Sparky Smith leaving a room down the hall—then the room light went out.

The station agent moved in Jim Mason's direction. He passed not two feet from him, slipped out the rear door into the night.

Jim did not follow. There was something else he wanted to find out. Who was the man to whom Sparky had spoken?

He padded down the hall in darkness, one hand ready on the butt of a six-gun. He located the door in the darkness, turned the knob carefully and

pushed inside. The light was still out.

And somewhere in the front of the building a door slammed. There was a sliver of light beneath another door directly across the darkened room. He moved across to it and opened the door.

He was looking out onto a long barroom, deserted now because of the excitement down the street at the bank. Jim stepped quickly down the length of the room, opened the front door.

A hundred yards away, a horseman was disappearing in a cloud of dust. Impossible now, because of the darkness, to make out who the man was. Jim stepped out into the roadway. . . .

And spun on his boot heel as a rider approached swiftly behind him.

It was Mary Mortimer, looking very slim in riding clothes. She was riding a white pony, and her legs looked long and firm and slender. Her quiet, smooth features shadowed as she slid from the saddle.

"Jim Mason!" she said tensely. "I've been looking for you!"

He caught the note of urgency in her taut voice. "What's wrong?" he prodded.

"It's about Sue," Mary gasped. "She . . . she's disappeared!"

INSTANTLY he thought of the man who had ridden up to the Double Diamond ranch-house. Don Pedro! Who was he? What had the fancy-dressed vaquero sought?

He thought, *"Sue's in danger. That's more important than anything else."* Townsmen were out there on the south road waiting for him. He knew what they would be saying if he did not show up to join in the hunt for killers and marauders. Well, that could wait. . . .

He looked at Mary Mortimer. "How do you know she's disappeared?"

The girl's troubled eyes were level with his own. "Sue and that stranger left the ranch shortly after the men started for town," she said swiftly. "She told me she was going home first. I was to meet her there as soon as I was ready."

"Don Pedro left with her?"

Mary nodded. "I followed along as soon as I changed my clothes and got a horse saddled. I stopped at Sue's house. She hadn't been there at all!"

A cold feather of dread leaped along his spine. Where *was* Sue? Had she gone willingly with the stranger? Or had she been *forced* to accompany him?

These things flashed through his mind even as he turned and hurried down the street, the girl at his side. They reached the hotel hitching rail, where he had left his horse. He swung lithely into the saddle. He was thinking about the way the road from the Double Diamond led into town from the northeast; the way it passed Sue's house. The *only* way into town from that particular direction.

He looked at Mary Mortimer. "You didn't see them anywhere along the ride in, not even after you left Sue's house?"

She shook her head. "But there's one other way they could have gone. There's a trail that leads southward through the valley. If they had swung north, I would certainly have seen them."

Jim nodded. He picked up the reins. He explained about the group of riders he was supposed to join south of the town. "Perhaps those men have seen her," he finished. "I'll head that way. . . ."

The girl in the saddle beside him suddenly leaned over impulsively and touched his arm. There was warm tenseness in her shadowy eyes. "I wish you wouldn't, Jim . . ." she started.

He stared at her, puzzled.

"I mean," she raced on, "don't join that posse heading southward toward the Owlhoot Hills. I'm afraid!"

"Afraid of what, Mary?"

She hesitated, then plunged on, "There's danger there for you. I know!" Her eyes held his, slid away. "Don't ask me why, please. But don't ride into the hills."

He said, "That's secondary, right now. I'm going to look for Sue."

She nodded, obviously relieved. "I'll go back to her house," she told him. "I'll wait there."

And he rode off into the night.

JIM MASON rode with worry heavy upon him. He kept thinking of Sue and the dashing fellow who had asked for her at the Double Diamond. It had been quite evident that Sue did not know the stranger. And yet Mary said Sue had ridden off with him. Why?

Questions pounded through his brain as he sent the powerful roan racing southward through the valley. The rangeland flattened out. In the distance, several miles off, the hills and broken buttes rose up darkly like grim sentinels in the moon-bright night. He saw no riders ahead.

Once he passed a bunch of strays huddled together near a clump of cottonwoods. But nothing else.

It must have been about an hour later that he first became aware of two vague figures far ahead. He drew up, letting the horse blow for a moment. The roan still had not gotten its second wind. He peered across the flats ahead.

Two riders. Impossible, though, to tell whether it was a man and a girl or not. He heeled the horse again and continued on. And shortly he realized that the two riders down yonder were cutting west, toward the rising hills.

And so Jim Mason changed his own course. He swung off to the right. Perhaps he could intercept them before they reached the fringe of trees.

Before he had covered a mile, he knew that the two ahead were riding hard, pushing their horses to the limit. The gap was closing too slowly. They'd be in the hill country before he could reach them. Thought of this made him tense.

He thought worriedly, *"Please, God, don't let anything happen to Sue!"*

Slowly he was cutting down the intervening distance. His level gray eyes stared through the bright night. Brakes along a creek bed hid the two riders from view for a few moments. Then they appeared again. And Jim Mason was suddenly trembling.

Because it *was* a girl. He could see her now. A flash of bright color in the night. Her kerchief! The flare of her buckskin skirt. Sue!

Next he was sending the roan plunging toward the embankment leading down into the small arroyo. But before he reached it, the rider with Sue made a sudden move. He swerved his horse left. He was plainly visible for a moment, though the girl had disappeared. Then he drew rein.

A quick shot blasted toward Jim Mason. He was high, wild, going far over his head. It seemed more like a shot to scare him off than anything.

Regardless, before the man could pump lead again, Jim Mason had plunged down the embankment. Gravel slewed as the horse's hoofs pounded through the practically dry creek bed. Jim followed the bed of the creek southward a bit, until shortly his sharp eyes picked up the trail of the two riders ahead. He found where they had crossed. He prodded the roan up the embankment. Jim cleared the brakes, pushed out through

a clump of cotton-woods.

And drew up short. Sue and the man with her had disappeared!

HE HESITATED only an instant. Then he was whipping ahead again. The hills were a scant half mile ahead now. And he realized that Sue and the man with her had reached the trees while he was riding through the creek bed. They were heading up into the hills—those Owlhoot Hills of which Mary Mortimer had warned him. She had been fearful about his coming this way. There had been something she'd tried to tell him.

But there was no time now to wonder about that. Sue was already in those hills. She was somewhere ahead. Frantcally, Jim Mason spurred the horse. *"Sue, I'm coming. I'm right behind you!"*

It was only moments until he was in the deep woods. There was a trail, of sorts, following a rocky ravine that cut upward into the hills. Jim's trained eyes discovered other trail marks. The two riders were still ahead. He knew. He saw where dirt had been dug loose by a horse's hoof. Bark was scuffed from a moldy log that lay across the trail. Other things.

Moonlight came down through the trees and made white churchlike aisles of the forest corridors. The route steadily climbed. Up . . . up . . . The roan was blowing hard. Jim Mason stopped a few moments to give the animal a rest. And while he sat there, the great silence of the woods all around him, he heard the faroff, flat sounds. They came from the valley below. Rifle shots! He wondered who could be down there shooting?

The distant, flat sounds continued for a few moments, then stopped.

Jim Mason bent low across the saddle horn and studied the trail marks beneath him in the spots of moonglow. He started ahead again. There was no time now to find out about the shooting; he had to keep on the trail of the two people ahead.

The thought had occurred to him now that Sue was not a prisoner. There had been no indication that she had attempted to swing back, to break away. Obviously she was going with the stranger willingly. There must be a definite reason. And because he was worried about her, Jim intended to find out where she was going. Here in the Owlhoot Hills, where danger lurked, she was not safe. He had to reach her.

Suddenly he slowed the horse and peered sharply ahead in the night. The trail had abruptly widened. The ground flattened out and followed a ridge. Ahead he heard the crashing of hoofs through underbrush. Then that stopped, and there was swift silence.

He slid from the saddle, ground-tied the roan and moved forward through the pines that were all around him. Jim thought he heard a shout. Silence again.

Then there was the shot.

He drew to a stiff halt. He instantly recognized the sound that shattered through the silence of the big woods. It had been the crack of a six-shooter!

He stalked forward hurriedly now and reached the edge of a clearing deep in the pines. And he stared.

ON THE far side of the clearing was an old cabin. Its roof sagged. A window was broken. Even as Jim Mason watched he saw the sudden spurt of flame from inside that broken window. Lead whipped through the trees some distance to his left.

He swung.

And a shot answered the one from inside the cabin. Jim Mason gave a start. Someone was hidden there at a

point bordering the moon-lighted clearing in the woods!

He hunkered down, one of his .44s held ready in his own fist. He heard someone move. A man abruptly emerged from the edge of the woods and, crouched down, started running toward the old cabin.

Jim whirled at the sound of another movement somewhere close by. His eyes widened.

Don Pedro!

The tall, sleek-looking vaquero stepped right out into plain view. Two guns in his hands flashed . . . but not until the man across the clearing had seen him and started to fire. Then Don Pedro's guns cracked out.

A soft, pleasant chuckle floated above the dying roar of the weapons. Don Pedro was still on his feet. The man across the clearing was falling.

And the tall, fancy-dressed vaquero laughed easily. "And that, *señor*," he called out, "*ees* the way we treat *skonks!*"

Don Pedro spun as Jim Mason stepped out into view. Then his guns lowered. His white teeth flashed, and he bowed.

"Ah, it ees you, meester Texas Ranger." He grinned, his reckless dark eyes flashing. "Well, I have saved you the trouble of keeling an hombre! I have shoot heem for you!"

Both men turned as someone came out of the cabin. It was a man, very pale, very thin. One arm was done up in a make-shift sling. On the man's face was a stubble of beard. It made his paleness the more prominent. He was young.

Behind Jim Mason, the girl cried, "Danny! Danny, darling!"

She had been hidden there in the woods, and now she came rushing toward the young man who had half stumbled out of the cabin. She took him in her arms.

Jim Mason was immediately at her side. He helped her support the thin, pale-looking man. He was asking worriedly, "Sue, I followed you here. I wondered why you were with Don Pedro. I thought . . ."

She turned. Her hand touched his arm. "Oh, Jim! There wasn't time to get word to you. Don Pedro had information that someone had been sent here to kill . . ."

Words caught in her throat. She fiercely clung to the blond-haired young man. Her eyes swept back to Jim Mason's tense face.

"This is Danny," she half sobbed. "This is my brother!"

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS a somewhat disconnected story that young Dan Owens told them. He had been framed for a shooting in the valley. One of the sheriff's deputies himself had accused Dan Owens, claiming that he had evidence that would connect him with the shooting of a small-spreader.

Dan Owens told them how he had escaped to the hills, hiding out. He had been shot, but had managed to half drag himself to this old cabin. The rest was hazy. There had been a fever, he remembered, little food. He had managed to trap an occasional rabbit. There had been some wild berries.

Face haggard, eyes bloodstot, Dan Owens said, "I was too weak to get out of there. Besides, they were searching for me through the hills. Sometimes I spent whole days hiding in the woods. At night I would return here."

They were all inside the cabin now. Jim Mason, using a clean handkerchief that Sue had handed him, changed the soiled cloth bandage that was on Dan Owens' left arm. He studied the

healed-over wound and said cheerfully, "Young fellow, you must have good blood. It's healed nicely."

Sue fussed over her brother. Her eyes were tear-misted.

In the doorway, tall Don Pedro said, "Thees *gringo* out here ees dead. Perhaps one of you know heem?"

It was Sue herself who followed Don Pedro from the cabin. Jim Mason went with her.

Don Pedro's teeth flashed as he used a tooled leather boot heel to shove the limp figure over on its back.

Sue gasped. "It's Sheriff Ben Sutton!" she cried.

Don Pedro looked at Jim Mason and said smoothly, "*Señor,* there ees something I have known for a long time. Thees sheriff and those working for him are crooks. They steal cattle. They shoot innocent men in the back. They run *thees* valley any way they please."

Jim Mason nodded. "But there is a man higher up. The real brains of the organization. Sutton was just a dupe for the brains behind the rustlings and murders."

"Quite right, *señor,*" admitted Don Pedro. For the first time, the easy, reckless smile dropped from his smooth, dark features. "Thees crooks are verry clever. They shoot the man in the back. They tell that the Border Kid is the hombre that does thees theeng. But thees is all lies. The Border Kid never shoot the man in the back in hees life. He never draw the gun first!"

JIM MASON's eyes veered from Don Pedro to Sue's tense face. Her lovely blue eyes were wide. She started to say, "How do you know this thing ——"

And Jim Mason said quietly, "Sue, when you told me that the Border Kid was supposed to be your brother, I was startled. You see, the Border Kid, in a way, is a mythical character. He has never been seen. And yet killings have been blamed on him. He has been branded an outlaw. It is simply a crooked man's way of passing the buck; of shifting suspicion to someone else."

As he spoke, Jim's gaze took on a thoughtful look. He said, "Of course, there are little things that are bound to stick in your mind. In Mexico and Texas we have heard of the Border Kid. The murderer I trailed up here was supposed to be him. But now I realize that same rumor was spread down yonder. A killing was blamed on the Border Kid whereas he didn't do it at all . . . if there really is such a character."

Danny Owens had come from the cabin. He was standing at Sue's side, listening. His face was pale and lined and thin, but there was grim determination in his mouth.

Sue said worriedly, "Danny, you'd better rest——"

He patted her arm. "I'm all right now," he said. "With you here——" His arm went fondly around her slim shoulders.

Sue looked at Jim Mason. "But Jim, how do you *know* it wasn't the Border Kid?"

He reached inside his shirt, pulled out a creased photograph. He handed it to the girl. "Because," he said, "of this. It is a picture of the man I was after. He was once an outlaw in Texas, and some thought he was the Border Kid——"

Sue was suddenly wide-eyed with amazement. She stared first at the picture; then at the dead man on the ground.

"Ben Sutton!" she gasped.

He nodded. "Yes." He motioned to the still figure. "If that's Ben Sutton, then that's the man I was after!"

Jim Mason turned slightly, smiled at Don Pedro. "You know," he continued

thoughtfully, "as I said a moment ago, I've often picked up little bits of information. I've heard *other* things about the Border Kid. I've heard he's the fastest man on the draw in the Southwest. I've heard he never shoots a man in the back. And . . . that he never draws first. Some people say he's a tall, dashing-looking fellow with . . ."

Sue gave a surprised little cry. Her eyes were on the stranger who had such a steady smile. She looked at Jim. "You mean, Don Pedro here, might be the . . ."

Jim Mason nodded.

And Don Pedro gave a soft chuckle. His white teeth flashed in the moonlight. *"Señorita!"* he exclaimed. "It ees kind to flatter me the way you talk! I am just the poor Don Pedro, thees wandering adventurer who has not the home. . . ."

He shrugged, let the words trail off, seemed to come to an abrupt decision. "I think perhaps we should be getting back now." His eyes stared upward. "In a few hours, the moon she go out. Perhaps we have trouble finding the way through the forest. . . ."

Jim Mason grinned. He said, "Okay . . . Don Pedro." He looked at Sue, and he thought she understood.

THEY located the horse that Sheriff Ben Sutton had tied some distance from the cabin. Danny Owens was helped into the saddle. The trek back to the valley started.

The girl's brother rode beside the mysterious, almost handsome Don Pedro. Sue pushed on ahead with Jim Mason. She looked tired, he thought, and it was yet a long ways back to Loma. Dawn would be breaking before they got there.

He said feelingly, "Sue, perhaps we ought to stop and rest. You're tired. . . ."

She flashed him a warm smile. "Not anymore," she said quickly. "With Danny back . . . knowing that he's innocent . . ." She sighed. "I'm happy, Jim." Her hand reached out and sought his. "Happy because of a lot of things. Now I can be proud that you *are* a Texas Ranger. Before there was only fear . . . fear that Danny was the man you wanted. But now . . ."

He nodded. His hand held tightly over her own. He said, "There was that terrible thing that was between us. And now it's gone. From now on it's just you and I . . ." His face flushed a little. "About that job as foreman, that your mother offered, I'd like to take it. . . ."

Sue's deep blue eyes searched his face. She said softly, "Jim, you've *got* to take it. We need you now. *I* need you. . . ."

The sound of rifle shots interruped her words.

THEY drew up, listening. Jim said sharply, "It's from the valley again. I heard them when I was coming up this trail. There's trouble down there!"

He looked at those with him, spoke to Don Pedro. "You ride in with Sue and Dan. I'm going on ahead."

"But Jim——" Sue cried.

He paused, touched her arm reassuringly. "Don't worry, honey. I think this trouble in the valley is about cleared up. I think the real brains behind this trouble made a mistake in plans tonight. From the sound of those rifles, I would say that a few honest men are on the trail of crooks!"

With a quick wave of his hand, Jim Mason forked his horse and disappeared down the trail. Alone now, he rode recklessly, pushing the roan at full speed. In less than half an hour he emerged on a slope overlooking the valley.

And an amazing sight met his gaze.

A half mile away, a great hazy cloud hung in the moon-white night. It trailed out into the distance.

Jim Mason also heard the sound. The bleating of cows, the pounding of hundreds of hoofs. As he watched, he became aware of movements beneath that hanging curtain of dust. And he knew what it was.

Cattle . . . moving . . . being *driven* in one great herd. Hundreds of them. And even as he stared in amazement he heard more shooting. He caught a glimpse of two riders at the head of the moving herd. The men were pushing their horses at furious speed through the night.

Instantly Jim Mason himself forked the roan. He cut swiftly across the valley floor. Soon he approached the moving mass.

He saw other riders circling the herd, sending their swift mounts up against the lead steers, blocking the way in a desperate attempt to stop the movement of the cattle.

Jim rode up to meet them. He recognized a big, raw-boned man as one of the ranchers he had seen in town tonight. The fellow swung.

Jim Mason yelled, "What's wrong?"

The rider pulled up a little ahead of the advancing mass of steers. He had recognized Jim Mason, and now he called out, "The biggest rustling job ever attempted in the valley! There's brands from a dozen spreads here. And a dozen crooks driving them. That stunt of sending a posse to the north was a trick. We got wise to it. We circled back, and found this!"

They had to keep riding ahead of the advancing steers as they yelled at one another. There was the danger of menacing horns.

Jim Mason yelled, "It was Sparky who said the raiders headed north!"

The raw-boned rancher jerked his head. "We caught him. He was with the gang riding herd on these steers. Now he's dead."

"And the others?" Jim prodded.

"Most of them have been caught. A few got shot up. The boys are trying to stop this moving herd. We've *got to* stop them."

He understood. A stampede could quickly start. He thought swiftly.

And he remembered the river bed with the small stream still flowing through it, back yonder. He pointed. "Head them east . . . into that stream bed. That'll stop them!"

TWO more riders appeared out of the cloud of alkali dust that formed the drag . . . where straggling cows brought up the rear of the moving mass. Orders were yelled down the line. The lead steers were shunted in the direction desired. The other followed.

And then, from somewhere back along the drag, there was a wild shout. A rider with a mask shielding his features appeared from out of the dust cloud. He was riding a powerful bay, and he sent the horse streaking toward the brakes along the stream bed.

A rider was behind him. He yelled, "Stop him. That's the one. That's . . ."

And there was a shot. The man near Jim Mason had raised his rifle. He fired once. The big man seated astride the bay swayed in the saddle, then pitched to the ground. The horse continued on.

The herd had swung now. Jim Mason and the man with the smoking Winchester in his steady hands were clear of the moving cattle. The raw-boned man looked at Jim. He said quietly, "You know who that is, don't you?"

Jim nodded. "I think I do. I overheard Sparky Smith talking to him earlier tonight. The sound of his

voice has been pounding through my mind."

"Come on," the rancher said.

Other men were riding up now. A few stayed with the herd, slowing now as the cows reached water. A half dozen men were shortly grouped around the motionless figure on the ground. The bandanna mask had been pulled askew.

Someone said, "Clint Mortimer!"

Jim Mason sat there looking solemnly down at the figure on the ground, and he nodded slowly. "I had an idea," he said quietly.

DAWN was breaking over the distant mountains when Jim stepped out onto the porch with Sue Owens. Behind them, somewhere inside the house, someone was talking.

Sue said, "Mother's with Danny. We got him home about fifteen minutes before you arrived. He's going to be all right."

"And Mary Mortimer?" he asked quietly.

"She knew, of course. Like you said, she wanted to tell you. That's why she didn't want you to ride into the hills. . . .

He nodded. "There was something about her manner . . . a bitterness. She had learned that her father was the real leader of crime throughout the valley. That's the first thing I suspected."

Sue said, "Yes. She was waiting here at the house when we got back. She must have read the truth in our faces. She knew, somehow, that Clint was . . . dead."

"What is she going to do?"

"She's going back to New York. Lucille's going with her. The Double Diamond will be sold, and she said that the money will be divided among all those who suffered because of her father's dealings."

They sat there on the topmost step, staring across the rangeland that was slowly becoming bright with the new day. Jim remembered something. He asked abruptly, "What happened to Don Pedro? Where is he?"

Sue smiled. "You can't imagine! He's going to New York with Mary and Lucille. Can you imagine him in New York?"

A grin replaced the grimness that had been on Jim Mason's lips. He said, "I can imagine the Border Kid in New York. He'll be a sensation."

"You really think, then, that he was the Border Kid?"

He shrugged. "Who knows?"

Sue smiled up at him. "Anyway, he was fascinating."

"Now look here," he started reproachfully, "that sort of lets me out."

Sue's coppery gold head was abruptly flung back. Warm soft lips raised up to his own. She breathed, "Does . . . *this* . . . let you out?"

He couldn't very well answer. His lips were sealed against her own. Then, when her head was buried childlike against his shoulder, when he would have spoken, he hesitated.

Because he knew that, utterly weary as she was, Sue had fallen to sleep.

TWINS? THAT GOES DOUBLE!

IT IS the custom among the Mohave Indians of Arizona to dress twin girls or twin boys exactly alike. Dr. George Devereux, sociologist at the University of Wyoming, found that even the cradles used for twins were exactly alike. Boy twins were distinguished from girl twins by the shape of the cradle and by the cradle ornaments. Moreover, visitors who came to see the twins must bring exactly the same gift for each for the Indians believe that if the gifts are different one of the twins would take offense and return to heaven. —*Richard Tate.*

BREAD OF THE INGRATE

By Norrell Gregory

It's funny how a guy can be as tough as nails in going after what he wants; but when it's a woman, he goes soft!

KANSAS sun and Kansas wind had stiffened the mud in the main street of Caldwell and the tall sorrel which Ferry Fargo rode stalked through it with a sort of distasteful dignity.

The horse stamped thunderous hooves on the barn's boarded entrance and when Ferry swung from the saddle, McAlpin, the long nosed barnman, trotted forward to take the bridle. McAlpin spoke in a guarded monotone:

"Red Buck is in town, marshal."

Ferry felt the short hairs on his neck rise and prickle. He gave the entry's dark length a swift and oblique look, then as McAlpin led the sorrel back, turned and faced the innocent length of the street.

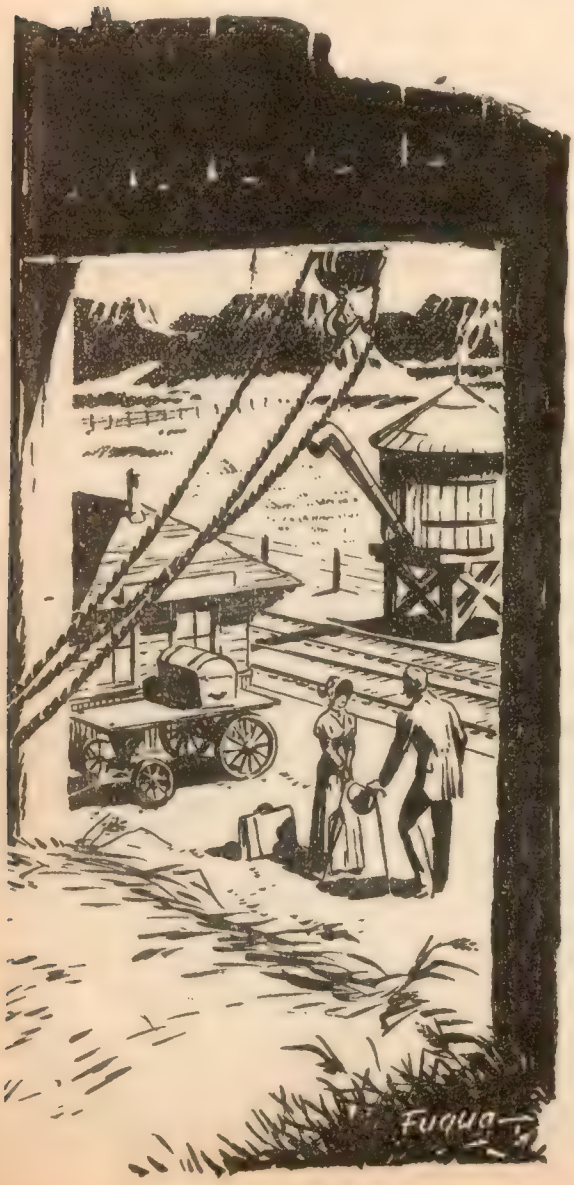
He stood there, a tall and seasoned young man with a prodigious taper from his shoulders to his hips and a prodigious watchfulness in his eyes. This was Kansas, but yonder was the line, and south of the line, the Territory, where Indian Police represented the only indifferent law. It had been many a moon since Red Buck, that malicious half-breed, had ventured north of the line.

Odessa Turk came out of the hotel directly across the street, saw him standing there, waved hurriedly, then came picking her way across the all but submerged stepping stones. A tall girl, she moved with an unconscious grace, the rude April wind buffeting her skirts, and Ferry's straight lips stirred and softened as he watched her. A year ago if any man had told him that he would have relinquished, without a fight, his claim on Odessa Turk, he would have branded that man as a liar and fool.

But he had.

Flushed by the precarious crossing, Odessa gained the more secure footing of the board walk, gave him a quick and disturbing look, then said, "George wants to see you, Ferry."

He nodded, his lips suddenly straight and tight again. Then as they moved towards George Tilden's small law office, she slipped her arm through his. It was an old intimacy of hers, and even though he knew it meant nothing



"It wouldn't be healthy to pull that trigger," said Fargo in a soft voice. "Would it, now?"

now, it stirred his pulse as it always had.

He said humorously, "Don't tell me that you and your young crusader have had a spat."

"Oh no!" she said. "Not *that*. But I'll let George explain things. He can do it so much better than I."

Yes, Ferry thought wryly, George Tilden was damned good at that sort of thing. A successful lawyer had to be.

In the small office George Tilden sat with his fine boots cocked on his desk, his spotless shirt open at the throat, his black hair unruly as usual. He sprang to his feet with a quick grace and his finely chiseled face broke into a ready smile.

"The old lawdog himself!" he cried. "Ferry, how are you?"

"What did you want to see me about, George?"

Tilden laughed. "Always blunt and straight to the point! Ferry, I think that is what I like most about you. This will take some explaining."

HE PLACED a chair for Odessa, touched her cheek with a light and possessive hand, and drew a smile in return. Then he moved over and stood before a large wall map of the Territory. Looking at him, Ferry could not but admire the easy grace of his attitude, the mark of the thoroughbred so evident in every inch of his slender length.

Tilden touched a blocked off section squarely in the center of the map.

"This, Ferry, is Oklahoma. The name is Indian and means 'Beautiful Land', and it is indeed well named. Upwards of two million acres in this section of the finest land—"

Ferry said quietly, "We've both been at the Turk ranch, George."

Tilden acknowledged the rebuff with a nod then continued his lesson in geography: "This land, prior to the Rebellion was owned by the Creeks and Cherokees. But since they espoused the cause of the South, after the war was over, the Government declared that they had lost their right to governmental benevolence and demanded that they relinquish their claim. A treaty was made and they ceded this land back to the Government, and they were paid a few cents per acre for it. What I'm getting at, Ferry, is that Indian title to this land was *totally extinguished.*"

Ferry nodded. "I get that, George."

"It's important. And the marvel is that it has been overlooked so long, because the Homestead Law of 1879 says, and I quote, 'All land belonging to the United States Government to which Indian title has been or may hereafter be, extinguished, shall be subject to the right of pre-emption under the conditions, restrictions and stipulations provided for by law' ".

Again Tilden paused. "What does that mean to you, Ferry?"

"I'm no lawyer, George."

"Why it means simply that this particular section of the Territory is and has been for upwards of twenty years, *public domain,* and as such is subject to the Homestead Laws. It means that the Indian leases that Odessa's father holds, along with those of other cattlemen in that territory, are actually null and void. And that, in short, is why I have decided to challenge the validity of those leases in the Federal court at Topeka."

Ferry said quietly, "Even though you know it will mean the ruin of every cattleman in that section, George?"

"Nonsense! All of those men have received returns a hundredfold on the insignificant amount they paid out for the leases. Let's take the case of Odessa's father. He could cash in his cattle interests alone and retire with enough

to live comfortably the rest of his life. He is losing nothing, because he never actually had any right to use that land. His lease, and all the others, are based on a faulty interpretation of the Homestead Laws."

Odessa said quickly, "Ferry, George is looking at the greater good to the most people."

"Exactly!" said Tilden. "This land rightfully belongs to the people. And when I establish my case in the courts, it will be so recognized. Think what it will mean, Ferry!" Then as always when his vivid imagination was fired, Tilden's voice soared. "A hundred thousand people will surge over these borders overnight! It will mean statehood for Oklahoma, and I can claim the high honor of having played my small part in restoring to the people that which is theirs, and in adding another state to the Union."

FERRY was silent for some time, his face pulled into deeply reflective lines. He realized that Odessa was studying him with an intense and breathless interest, and recalled that he had been brought here for some fixed purpose.

"George," he said whimsically, "I always said you was a winner. Now what part have you got picked out for me to play in this history making event?"

Tilden seemed strangely at a loss. Words were his tools and usually he knew which ones to use.

"The trouble," he finally admitted, "is Odessa's father. Outside of us three, he is the only one that knows anything about this, and to put it mildly, he doesn't like it. I am going to Topeka today to file my brief, and Odessa and I had planned to get married there. But we want—we don't want—"

Odessa came to his rescue. "It's just this, Ferry—father has always admired and respected you. If anyone can make him see reason, you can do it. We want you to explain to him why it has to be this way, and that even if George didn't do it, someone else will, eventually."

"Not," Tilden cut in quickly, "that it will alter our plans. "But naturally I would prefer that our wedding day would not be marred by discord, and you know that the old gentleman can be pretty violent. Will you talk to him?"

"Of course," said Ferry. Then turning suddenly on Tilden he said, "Tell me this, George—how long have you known about this business? Just stumble onto it recently?"

Tilden smiled. "If you mean by that, that I am going off half cocked, I'm not. I discovered it before I came into this Godforsaken country. In fact the situation is what brought me here. I saw it as a God-sent chance to distinguish myself."

Odessa, suddenly pale, said quickly. "I'll go with you to see father, Ferry. He's over at the Eagle House."

As she slipped her arm into Ferry's, George said shortly, "Really, Odessa, it's not necessary. We've got less than an hour to catch the last train out today."

"My things are at the hotel," she smiled over her shoulder at him.

As they walked back towards the hotel Ferry found himself unaccountably wordless. He watched a flock of pigeons swoop down on the livery barn, touch the roof lightly, then beat wildly upward again.

He said casually, "There must be an owl in the hay mow today."

There was an edge of impatience in Odessa's voice. "Ferry, what do you think? Is George right?"

"If he isn't, it will be the first time I ever knew him to be wrong on a point

of law. How," he asked jocosely, "will it feel to be the wife of the first Governor of Oklahoma, Odessa?"

HER arm stirred restlessly within his and the edge of her impatience sharpened.

"That is not what I mean. Ferry, why did you ask George as to how long he had known about this affair?"

Ferry did not reply at once, and as they climbed the hotel stairs she stopped him.

"Why?" she asked again.

He smiled at her. "George made that clear, Odessa. This is too serious a matter for mistakes."

"It wasn't," her face was suddenly pale again, "because you knew that father loaned George money to help him get established here? George repaid every cent of that loan, Ferry."

"Odessa, it is not for me to pass judgment on the man you have picked for yours. That is your right, alone. George Tilden pinned this badge on my vest. I count him as my friend."

She pushed him suddenly towards the head of the stairs.

"Father is in the front room, overlooking the street. I'll wait here."

Ferry climbed the stairs and moved down the dark corridor. Every man, he thought, must have his own self-imposed code of honor. And while he knew his did not coincide with that of George Tilden's, it was not his to pass judgment.

He knocked, then faintly smiled at the deep resonance of the voice that bade him enter. No man, ever once hearing the voice of Grant Turk, could ever again mistake it. It typified the man—resolute, rugged and implacable.

He pushed open the door and the square, powerfully built figure that had been standing before a front window, wheeled about.

"Ferry!" said Grant Turk. "What brings you here, *now?*"

Behind the bushy expanse of his full beard all of this man's facial features were hidden. But Ferry knew Grant Turk needed no mask to conceal his emotions. He was as solid and unmovable as a block of granite from the Reno Hills.

"Grant," he said, "I've talked to George Tilden, and Odessa, and I know the situation. What you've got to consider is this: The world progresses, and every man advances at the expense of somebody else. Even I earn my pay at the expense of the criminal and outlaw. You made your stake at the expense of the Indian and the little cowman who couldn't stand against you. The thing for you to do is to quit hating George Tilden and face facts. His code may not be your code or mine, but he's got a brilliant future ahead of him. He's educated, he's got a razor-sharp mind and he's ambitious. And what's most important, Odessa wants him. That ought to be enough."

GRANT Turk stood listening with a curious and amazed expression in his eyes.

"Ferry," he said heavily, "you're wasting your wind. So far as that scoundrel is concerned," he motioned towards the street with a heavy hand, "after today he will no longer be an item of consideration. He will be dead."

The bald bluntness of it shook Ferry. He knew well the mould in which Grant Turk had been cast, and he had expected resentment from him. But this far transcended even the worst of his fears and he saw at once the utter futility of trying to reason with this man now. He would have as much effect on a granite cliff.

"I can appreciate how you feel, Grant," he said quietly. "But I want

to remind you of one thing. This is not the Territory. This is Kansas, and when I put on this badge I took an oath and I have kept that oath. I intend to continue to keep it as long as I wear the badge."

Unmoved Turk replied, "Keep it and be damned to you."

"George and Odessa are catching the next train north. They'll be married in Topeka. And *you*, Grant, are staying right where you are."

A sardonic humor lighted this implacable old rangeman's eyes. "There'll be no wedding," he said.

Ferry arose, his eyes suddenly hard. "You have your orders."

Wrath flamed suddenly in Grant Turk's lambent eyes.

"You!" he said. "You giving *me* orders. Ferry, I've been even worse mistaken in you than I was in the scoundrel you are trying to defend. I thought you had iron in your bowels. You're stuffed with sawdust! Great God Almighty! Here my fool girl, my one and only child is throwing herself away on a damned ingrate that would not have lasted one short week in these parts if I had not put my money and my influence behind him and *you*, who could have with a dozen words set her straight, *defend him!* Get out of my sight you straw-boweled—"

He came at Ferry with a wildness in his eyes, and he put his massive hands on Ferry's chest and pushed him backward.

"Out—out!" he kept mouthing. "Out of my sight—out—"

He was an insane man for the moment, and so, Ferry knew not wholly accountable. Nothing short of a gun barrel across his thick skull would be of any effect, and he had no stomach for dealing thus with a man that had been like a father to him.

So he allowed Grant Turk to shove him roughly out of the room but at the door he issued a final warning.

"Don't try to leave this room, Grant."

THE door slammed in his face and Ferry met Odessa at the head of the stairs. She read the answer in the bleakness of his face.

"Don't feel too badly, Ferry," she said. "Did—did he abuse you?"

He shook his head and for the moment they stood there at he head of the stairs up which moved the gentle evening wind. A horseman dashed through the mud of the street and a piano somewhere along saloon row struck into the day's most popular tune.

"Odessa," he said heavily, "there's only one thing for you to do. If you want George, catch that train and marry him, today. Nothing will ever change your father that's just one of the hard things of life."

She swayed a little and he put out his hand to steady her. Then her weight came against him and he could feel her tremble. From the dance hall a girl's voice came up to them, singularly clear and distinct:

But he ate of Jesse's bread
And he slept in Jesse's bed,
And he laid Jesse James in his grave.

A long shudder ran through this girl and Ferry felt her full weight come against him. Always she had the quality of moving a man strongly, and never had he felt that quality so powerfully as now.

"Odessa," he said, his voice suddenly unsteady. "Odessa—"

She lifted her face, and suddenly, his iron resolve gone, he kissed her, and found her unexpectedly eager.

Below, sharp bootfalls crossed the corridor, then George Tilden's conta-

gious voice came up to them. "Odessa, we've only a few minutes to make the train."

Quickly she stood away from him. There was a strange glow in her eyes and her mouth was soft.

"Ferry—" she began, but then George Tilden's impatient boot was on the stairs and again he was calling her name. Odessa hesitated yet a moment, then she turned quickly and moved to meet Tilden at the foot of the stairs and he heard her say to him, "I haven't had time to change, George. You'll have to take me as I am."

And then Tilden's laughing rejoiner and then the two of them passed out of the hotel, and so, Ferry knew, out of his life.

He stood there a long moment, thinking the thoughts of a man that has lost, and wondering if George Tilden's code wasn't the best after all. Realizing that the pride of a man can be a bitter taskmaster. Then he went slowly down the stairs and took a lobby seat where he could command both the street and the stairway behind him.

OVER there beyond the liverybarn he could hear the branch line engine turning on the tye. Someone came heavily down the stairs. Turning he saw Grant Turk, and he stood quickly.

"This far and no farther, Grant."

Grant Turk seemed to derive an enormous amusement from his concern. He calmly took a cigar from his pocket and calmly lighted it. Took a chair beside the one Ferry had just vacated and puffed hugely.

"The damned room up there was stuffy," he said, then fixing Ferry with his look, "You don't think I would *personally* soil my hands with the blood of an ingrate scoundrel like George Tilden, do you?"

"I'm glad you've changed your mind, Grant."

"I have not changed my mind."

The sun was down now, and Grant Turk's attention was centered on the flock of pigeons, swooping around the barn roof. They did not enter the hay mow, but wheeled upward wildly, around, down and then upward again. Suddenly Ferry felt that old nervous pricking the short hairs on his neck arose again as they had when McAlpin had warned him of Red Buck. In the press of events he had forgotten that notorious half-breed.

He said casually, "Grant, I'm going to step over to the barn to see that McAlpin has fed my horse properly. Don't stir out of that seat."

Turk only grunted. Ferry crossed the street, trying not to hurry. Down the street he saw Odessa and George come out of Tilden's office carrying luggage, and while Tilden locked the door, Odessa waved at him once more. He threw up his hand without checking his stride, then inside the barn's dark entry moved rapidly towards the open back doors. Noted that the sorrel's manger held no hay.

"Mac," he said loudly, "why in hell haven't you fed my horse?"

McAlpin, eyes enormous in the gloom of the entry, made wild signs to Ferry to talk lower. Ferry continued towards the back door, abusing the barnman profanely for his neglect of duties.

FROM the barn's back door he looked across the small corral at the railroad station. Beyond the station were the tracks, and on the tracks was the train, waiting the hour. A man could almost have tossed a stone from the barn's back door to the railroad platform.

There was a whistling of pinions above his head and again the pigeons swooped down on the barn. Tipping

his face up, Ferry saw them glance past the window up there, giving to the haymow. One bird hung fluttering a moment before this window, then swooped up and away again.

His nerves sang like a struck, tempered wire. Pigeons should go to roost at sunset. Over at the far end of the long station platform he saw two people coming towards the waiting train. Odessa and George Tilden.

The safety valve on the engine moaned warningly. Opened and sent a towering pillar of steam screeching upward into the now still evening air.

The prolonged bellow of the valve killed every sound within a quarter mile radius and Ferry suddenly spun on his heel and took great reaching strides back into the barn. He went up the ladder leading to the haymow with a lunging drive, then as the safety valve continued to howl, thrust into the mow, over the hay and back towards the upper rear window which gave an unobstructed view of the station platform.

A few feet back from this open window crouched a man with explosive red hair. He was lining the sights of a rifle on the station platform and so completely had the howl of the safety valve covered Ferry's movements, that even now he did not know Ferry stood close behind him.

The safety valve closed momentarily and in the unearthly silence that prevailed, Ferry's voice cut a sharp and jarring impact:

"Drop it, Red!"

Red Buck stiffened. He did not even lower his arms, but let the gun fall noiselessly to the hay. Over his frozen form Ferry saw Odessa and George Tilden appear in the square of the window, and George stopped there a moment while he spoke to the conductor, making a perfect target. Then the safety valve lifted again with its howl and bellow, and Red Buck apparently sensing Ferry's momentary distraction, whirled and struck.

His bullet plowed through Ferry's hair, and the muzzle blast from the gun left Ferry stunned and blinded, and Red Buck shot again.

Ferry shot once, and as the now moving engine's exhaust hammered through the window, Red Buck crumpled. Ferry stood over him a moment, grimly cautious. Here was the end of the trail for a man who was reputed to have killed more men, *for pay*, than any renegade ever to come out of the Nations.

RED BUCK stirred not. Ferry knelt and went quickly through his pockets. Extracted a sizable sheaf of bank notes, counted them swiftly then thrust them into his pocket.

McAlpin watched him climb down the ladder with wide and terrified eyes. His throat muscles worked but no words came out. Ferry's eyes were grim.

"You can put down hay now, Mac," he said.

He crossed the street and entered the hotel lobby. Grant Turk sat there in the dusk, his great shoulders slumped. Ferry touched his shoulder.

"Here, Grant," he said, "is some of your property. Don't shy at that blood stain. Just thank God it's not George Tilden's blood."

Wordless, Grant Turk stared at the sheaf of bank notes.

"Grant," said Ferry, "when a man gets to the point where he has to hire his killing done, it's time he retired. You never dropped that low before."

Turk suddenly thrust the money away and pulled himself heavily to his feet, turned slowly towards the stairs, where he staggered, and Ferry, catching his arm, helped him up the stairs and down the corridor to his door.

There Grant Turk paused. In the

darkness Ferry could not see his face, but his voice was that of an old man, a beaten man, but one resigned to his fate.

"Who," he said, "will carry on after I am gone? Ferry, what kind of son will *that* union sire?"

Ferry said, "She wanted him, Grant, and that ought to be enough for us."

"Fool!" Grant Turk spoke with a slow and dreadful heat. "She wanted *you*. And you was too damned proud to give her a chance to correct her mistake."

He closed the door in Ferry's face and Ferry went slowly down the dark corridor towards the stairs. She did give me my chance, he was thinking, and I was too stupid to see it for that.

At the head of the stairs he paused, hearing the street door open and close. A rush of warm night air swept up the stairs and beat against him gently. And some one came lightly up the stairs. He stood still and trembled.

"Odessa?" he said, his voice breaking badly.

Her voice was a low, contented murmur. "Ferry."

Incredulity thinned his voice. "You didn't go with George?"

"I only went to explain to him why I couldn't go. Ferry," she put her hands on his shoulders again and again he felt her breath on his face, softly fragrant, "why did you wait so long to let me know that you wanted me? Why did you let me make such a fool of myself?"

"I have mighty little to offer a girl, Odessa."

"But you have what a girl *wants*, Ferry."

He put his arms around her and she dropped her head on his shoulder. Northward, the train's receding whistle roamed faintly through the street.

THE END

★ THE SEA-FARING COWBOY ★

AMONG the fanciful legends which have grown up with this nation, there are few to top the story of Bowleg Bill, the cowboy who was "shanghaied" to ride the ocean waves. The exploits of Bowleg Bill have been favorites of the yarn-spinners and habitual liars found in the barber shops, general stores, and on the park benches of America. Some of the old timers can still sing you the melody to Bowleg Bill's song—a collection of ditties which are a reiteration of his adventures at sea. There are forty-eight stanzas in all, but—unfortunately—none of them are suitable for print.

Bill's career at sea was entirely unpremeditated on his part. In his day whaling ships almost always had trouble assembling a crew. The voyage often lasted several years; the work was dangerous, and the job was not a popular one among seamen. Men, called "crimps," were hired to bring hands aboard—and their methods were far from ethical. The crimp would meet a likely-looking fellow at a bar, buy him a few drinks, and then slip him a dose of knock-out drops. When the victim came to, the ship would be far at sea. Escape was impossible.

Bill was dealt with in this manner on one of his rare trips away from the plains of Wyoming. His eight feet four inches were his only recommendation for the job. Drugged into a submissive stupor, he was hoisted aboard the whaleship Sawdust Sal. When his eyes opened upon daylight once more, it was morning and the Sawdust Sal was well out to sea on a cruise of three years or longer. Bill was furious and for a while it seemed as though he could do nothing about it. He tried reaching for his holster, but the motion was wasted. It had been emptied of its useful contents while he had slept. His only reply to the Captain's orders for obedience were a few well-aimed oaths. When Captain Slateface reached for his pistol to make a more forceful attempt to squelch the cowboy's rebelliousness, Bill surprised him by pulling a long six shooter out of nowhere. The mate who had taken the gun from Bowleg's belt had not thought of searching his boots. The Captain did not flinch. Out-maneuvered, he refused to give an inch of ground.

Bang! The six shooter roared out, and when the smoke lifted, there stood the skipper with half his mustache clipped neatly off. A second shot made fast work of the other half of his mustache. By scaring the Captain and disarming him, he forced him to order the crew to turn the ship back toward port. And while the skipper sat by the after-hatch and growled through the shortened hairs of his upper lip about mutiny and "four-

legged lunatics," the Sawdust Sal wended its way homeward.

This was only the prologue to Bowleg Bill's life on the sea with the men who guided the sturdy wooden vessels of his day through the ocean waves. The episode of the "hoss-mackerel" is by far, the most entertaining and far-fetched of the yarns which have grown up around this sea-roving cowboy.

"Hoss-mackerel" is the name given in Cape Cod waters to what elsewhere is known as the "tuna." For a few days each summer they pass through the waters near Cape Cod and get caught in the traps which at other times during the year are set for smaller fish. Only the more experienced fishermen handle the job harpooning since the tuna is quite large and active. Bowleg Bill appeared at the wharves as soon as he learned that there were hoss-mackerel to be caught. The name intrigued him; anything that had to do with "hosses" was right in his line, and he meant to show the other men where he was supreme. The boss of the crew refused to hear of Bowleg's participation. No green hands were wanted; he didn't want to take a chance with an inexperienced man. There was a fortune to be made, and he didn't want any bungling cowboys on the scene. Bill could not be discouraged however, and he finally offered to make his participation a sporting prroposition.

"Mister," says Bowleg," if you are a betting man, I'll jest hit the trail with you to them corral-things out yonder. And if I don't cut me out one of yore full-growed hoss-mackerel and bring him in bare-handed, without using none of them long handled prod-sticks, I'll pay you twenty silver dollars and marry yore meanest of kin!"

The boss figured this big cowboy must be slightly crazy, but he had heard so many yarns about him that finally he took the bet. Before dark that day the whole town was talking of the lunatic who was going after hoss-mackerel barehanded. Those fish weighed anywhere up to a thousand pounds each, so they had a right to their skepticism. Big odds were offered against Bowleg, but these people knew fish, and there were no takers among them.

The next morning the whole harbor was cluttered with small boats filled with people who were interested in viewing the spectacle. The town took Bill's bet as an insult, and as he moved out toward the traps they jeered and called out after him. It did not take long for the excitement to begin. At the first trap there was a great deal of thrashing and movement going on. In the center of it all was a great blue-silver body and six feet of sharp, slashing tail. The boys were already hauling on the net when Bowleg climbed over alongside his boss, Yank Daggett, and reminded him of their deal.

"That one over yonder!" Bill called out. "Will he weigh up to our bet?"

"Will he weigh up to it! He's two thousand pounds if he's a Scotch ounce, you lubber!"

"All right, boys," Bowleg sings out, "give me a clear field!" And he pushed Yank and a couple of the others aside and yelled to the hoss-mackerel. "Come along, leetle dogie!"

There were yells from the men, and Yank yelled the loudest. There were roars from the crowd as Bill reached out, got hold of the fish, and heaved. The tail slipped clear of his hands, and the hoss-mackerel slipped out of the net. What followed held every spectator spellbound.

Over the side jumped Bill, boots and all, and before the fish could get away he was perched on its back yelling at the top of his lungs. He waved his ten gallon hat in the air, and to all outward appearances seemed to be riding a bucking broncho. Yank groaned in agony. "There goes the biggest catch and the gawd-damnedest fool—that was ever set loose in these waters!" The crowd that was watching seemed to sense something else in this amazing exhibition. Somebody set up the cheer: "Ride him, cowboy!" and everyone that could took up these words and began to yell, too. All over the harbor, that cheer could be heard.

The cowboy had an iron grip on the fish's fins, and no matter how hard Slickbritches tried he could not shake him off. Bucking, diving, lashing to and fro made no difference. Bowleg still hung on tight. Then Slickbritches made one last furious leap—high up in the air he went. There were screams from the crowd. That jump had taken fish and cowboy over the bow of a ship! But after that leap, it was obvious that Slickbritches was losing wind. He stopped pitching, and slithered peacefully through the water of the harbor. All the fight had gone out of him. Bowleg Bill was still perched on his back and, willingly, the fish responded to all his directions. When Bill tugged on the right fin, the fish headed to the right; when the other fin was pulled, Slickbritches veered to the left. Bill rode the now docile Slickbritches in toward shore.

People were clamoring along the water's edge to be the first to shake the gallant cowboy's hand. They could not believe their own eyes when they saw Bill jump into the shallow water, turn the fish around, and shoo him out to sea. When Bill waded out of the water, they all wanted to know why he had done it. Some were mad enough to demand his arrest. But Bill did not seem perturbed at their furious faces. He just shook his head at the crowd. There was a sad look in his eyes. As he wiped away a tear he said:

"That pore old windbrooke waterbug! I tell you, folks, there ain't nawthing that'll break a cowhand's heart so quick as to find a critter—two-legged or four—with the rough all rode off at the first mount!"

The crowd thought that he had gone whacky, and maybe he had. But the cowboys all understand Bill's point of view, for they tell this story time and time again. As "whoppers" go, you'll have to look far and wide to find its equal.

The HOLDUP AT

ALL through the hot forenoon the town of Sunup rocked and chattered to the excitement, and new arrivals had only to listen to pick up the whole story in a matter of minutes. Passenger train No. 8, due in Sunup at 1:14 A.M., had been flagged to a stop by a red lantern just beyond the Jordan Creek trestle, a mile east of town. His impatient questions going unanswered, the engineer had climbed down into the darkness to find his fat belly pushing against the muzzle of a saddle gun. With the fireman, he had been thus immobilized for about five minutes, then he got his instructions to highball it if he didn't want a slug through his brisket.

It was at Jordan Creek that the locomotive tender suddenly sprouted out with six-guns

JORDAN CREEK

By Giff Cheshire

A telegraph message could say a lot in a few words, especially in a frame-up!

No. 8 had streaked on into Sunup before the train crew got a chance to put the story together. Three masked men had pulled off the robbery: the man who had jabbed menace into the engineer's fat middle, another who had caught the conductor and brakeman when they swung down to see what caused the unscheduled halt, and the last one who bunged the express messenger with his gun barrel and rolled the Yellow Hill Mining Company's bullion shipment out onto the grade. Not a one of the dozing passengers realized what was taking place.

Lance Cleagle had no need of hanging around the gathering places to learn the angles, to read briefly and shockingly the awful implications to himself. A key man at the depot, he had turned his chattering instrument over to his relief and come off duty at midnight. He had been catching a quick drink in the Clay Mug saloon when No. 8 rattled in late and proceeded to upset its schedule further by waiting there. He'd hurried back to the depot and found the station cluttered with trainmen and passengers and Red Frost, Lance's relief, pounding the key hot with urgent exchanges.

As Lance picked up the story, a peculiar feeling of foreboding had puckered his nerves, and it wasn't just because this was the first train stick-up the North Union railroad had experienced in years. Seeing that his services were not needed, he went on to his room in Mrs. Berg's boarding house, to take a good private look at this feeling. Now, in the middle of the next morning, and talking to Red Frost in the Clay Mug, he was still little advanced in understanding it.

Frost was a slight, middle-aged man with a shock of brick-red hair, and years of telegraphy had flowed under his lean, supple fingers. Now he looked at Lance closely, his eyes tinted by a kind of cool amusement. "George Saines' going to blister the earth around this town trying to find out who pulled that!"

Lance looked thoughtful. Saines was the division superintendent, who had every reason to be agitated. "Why this town?" Lance asked. "Just because it happened near here?"

Red Frost grinned. "Look, Cleagle. The Yellow Hill people don't advertise when they're putting bullion on a train. Never have, and they've been shipping gold for years. The slick way that was pulled, last night, means one thing in my head. Which same it's gonna mean to Saines and the railroad detectives and the county sheriff, when he gets here. Them hold-up men were tipped off by somebody on the inside."

Lance nodded, both puzzled and perturbed. He had been thinking the same thing from the very start, knew that many another was going to agree. "Mebbe. But the Yellow Hill outfit wouldn't fix to get its own gold stolen. Who else would know about it?"

"Joe Lilton, on the night trick over at Yellow Hill'd know it was being loaded. So'd the express messenger. They'd know what was going aboard, all right!"

"But how'd they get word to the bandits?"

"By telegraphing somebody here at Sunup. He'd know, too, after that."

LANCE twisted around in his chair and climbed to his feet. "You're crazy with the heat and I've got to eat my dinner." He strode down the length of the saloon and pushed out through the batwings, growing aware, as he progressed, of the curious stare Hoagy Dern, who owned the place, gave him as Lance passed him at the end of the bar.

The telegraph operator pulled his hat straight in a nervous gesture. Why had Frost brought up that one point, which had been so puzzling in Lance's own mind? No. 8 had pulled out of Yellow Hill at 11:38 the night before. As at Sunup, the tricks over there changed at midnight. This Joe Lilton's tour coincided with Lance's. He could likely tell from the activity there that bullion was going into the express car. But if he had flashed word to anybody in Sunup to get the stick-up artists set, Lance Cleagle himself would have had to receive it!

And the thing that disturbed and baffled Lance was the fact that he actually had received a queer message from Joe Lilton. Lilton had called him, and the unprecedented communication had automatically run out of Lance's pencil onto the yellow pad:

"Claudia on number eight."

"What the devil do I care?" Lance had asked, when nothing further came through.

"You know what to do, Cleagle!" had been the terse reply, and that had been the end of it.

Lance had let it go at that, but he had mechanically made a record of it. Operators often hoorawed each other over the chatter wire during dull and lonely tricks. Everybody knew about Lance Cleagle's interest in Claudia Wayless, and some of the more daring ones joshed him occasionally. She had gone down to Yellow Hill, and it had seemed natural enough even though unprecedented that Joe Lilton should take it on himself to tell Lance she was on No. 8, coming home. But Lilton's second remark—what in blazes had he meant?

Now all this had taken on a significance that Lance was reluctant to admit. Why had Hoagy Dern given him that queer, penetrating look? It was all adding up in a way Lance did not like. He had the strange feeling that Frost had been pressing him for some sinister reason, that Dern had wanted to see the effect. Dern and Frost weren't exactly cronies, but Frost spent most of his spare time in the Clay Mug. Hoagy Dern, on the other hand, had the inside track with Claudia Wayless.

Red Frost had seen Joe Lilton's message, for Lance had thought so little of it he had not removed it from the pad on which the operators automatically recorded anything they received. If that had been the tip-off, it raised a number of questions Lance could find no pleasant answers for. Why had it been sent to Lance Cleagle, why had Claudia's name been used, how had the bandits found out what it said and that it had come through?

THERE was an answer to the first and last questions so pat Lance was at first suspicious of it. It could be assumed that the conniving was between Lilton and Frost, himself. Lilton would have to send his message before he turned his key over to his relief, making it necessary for Lance, in Sunup, to take it. Maybe they had been obliged to rely on Lance's unsuspiciously leaving it on the pad so Frost could see it. It would have been easy, when he came on duty at midnight, for Frost to signal through the window to somebody waiting outside that the big night had come!

But why had Claudia's name been used, and why had Frost gone out of his way to voice the opinion that it had been an inside job? Why had Hoagy Dern shown special interest in this incident?

No. 8 had been in fifteen minutes and all sorts of people had been milling around the depot when Lance returned, the night before, so he did not know if

Claudia Wayless had actually come in on that train. And a strong hunch was telling him he had ought to go talk to her about it.

Lance turned off Chestnut street and went into the big Rosemary restaurant. It was almost noon, and the place was beginning to fill up. He went on down to the end and through an open door, taking off his hat as he stepped into Claudia's little office.

A cool, carefully groomed young woman looked up from her desk and nodded in slight surprise. She was a dark, slender girl, and her oval face was the site of quick, spirited and stirring animations. But now she was cool, for the relationship between the two, once fervent, had lately been strained and bitter.

"Hello, Lance. I wasn't expecting you."

He stood before her, broad where she was slender, light where she was dark, calm and steady where she was dynamic and brooding. "Were you on the train, last night?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Just wondered." Business took this active and ambitious young woman to half a dozen towns strung along the North Union, towns in which she operated restaurants as big and profitable as this Rosemary concern. It had been the reason why the feeling that once stirred the pair of them, there at the start, had turned to gnawing unhappiness, at least for Lance. He thought of it bleakly as he watched her.

LANCE CLEAGLE had been assigned to this town of Sunup some time before Claudia Wayless came to open up another restaurant for her string. He had met her at a town dance and been in love with her before their first two-step together was finished. He had re-doubled his ambition to climb high in the North Union, then. At first that had seemed enough for her, and there had been one sweet, flaming moment in which he had held her close and the future had seemed bright and certain.

Then slowly he had grown aware that the ambition that burned in her was different to his own. With her it was a brooding, restless thing that seemed to animate her waking and sleeping. She was impatient of the careful strides Lance had charted for himself. Once she had whirled on him:

"You're a fool to keep plugging away in that line, Lance! This West is new and crawling with opportunities for smart people! I came from a poor family, and I've never had anything. But I mean to have everything! And soon! I worked as a waitress to earn enough money to start my first restaurant! I made that first one start a second and the second a third and there'll be no end to it!"

"I know," Lance had replied uncomfortably. "It's a lot to ask you to give up!"

"I don't have to give up!"

"And I don't care to marry a woman who's more successful than I am!"

For a long moment she had looked at him closely, weighing him, nodding in approval. "I like that! But it would be so easy for you to be more successful than I am, Lance! You're educated, and naturally smart besides! Get into something for yourself!"

"I want to be a railroad man."

She waved an impatient hand. "Look at Hoagy Dern! He's not half as smart you are, and little older. Yet he owns the saloon and a store, and he's making money hand over fist!"

It would have been fortunate had the example of Hoagy Dern never been introduced into the argument, for it soon became the core of the contention.

And as she shut herself against Lance Cleagle, Claudia had seemed to turn more and more to the enterprising Dern who, Lance admitted, was her match in volatility and restless seeking.

Now, uncomfortable under her questioning eyes, Lance felt that he had to know if she was aware that through her name she had been drawn into the curious situation surrounding the robbery of No. 8.

HE TOOK seat across the desk from her, letting himself feel for a moment the stir of excitement that went through him always in her presence. Now as ever he was convinced that she was the one woman for him, and he wondered at the strange blend of feeling in a man that would permit him to adore and disapprove of a woman at the same time.

Abruptly he said, "The telegraph operator at Yellow Hill informed me that you were taking No. 8, last night. Did you know he was doing it?"

For an instant he thought a guarded look had flashed in her eyes. She regarded him somberly, keeping the expression from spreading. "Hardly, seeing I don't even know the Yellow Hill telegraph operator."

Lance nodded. "Then 'Claudia' was a code word. There had to be a big leak from the inside, Claudia. Hell's going to be raised a mile in the air before this thing's settled. I'm in it to my ears whether I like it or not. The bandits weren't gambling when they hit that train. They knew the bullion was on it. They made their play only a mile out of Sunup. The tip-off had to come over the wire. If anybody had tapped it any place to pick up a pre-arranged signal, I'd have heard it. There wasn't anything like that. The word came into Sunup. It came from Joe Lilton in Yellow Hill, and it was sent to me. Likely nobody else will think so, but I had nothing to do with it beyond unconsciously recording it on a pad at the depot. Therefore, the conniving had to be between Joe Lilton and Red Frost, plus whoever those three men were who stuck up the train. But do you know how the authorities are going to peg it when they get going?"

Claudia nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. That the conniving was between Joe Lilton and you."

Lance grinned dryly. "I've got a hunch I'm going to have something plenty odorous dumped on top of me. And more. Don't forget your name was used in the tip-off message. You're rather well known as an ambitious gal, my pretty. You're apt to have to prove that your name was used without your knowledge and consent."

Rising abruptly, Claudia turned suddenly troubled eyes upon him. "You think that involves me?"

"There'll be those who will. They'll wonder how come you took the train at just that convenient time and why Lilton sent that message without your asking him to."

"What do you think?"

"That you are very lovely, my dear!" He grinned and turned toward the door, aware that he had evaded committing himself on the point.

AS HE went out through the restaurant and onto the street he wondered just what he did think about that. But certain as he was of the girl's all-consuming ambition, he could not accept the idea that she would turn to dishonest methods to gratify it. Not a girl of inherent refinement who had worked as a waitress in rough, tough frontier restaurants to get her start, who had brought ingenuity and courage and competence to the building

of a sizeable chain of eating houses. Yet under the circumstances the fact of her having been on that marked train, even unwittingly lending her name to the hold-up scheme, was baffling, as was the fact she had not chosen to elaborate on it.

This left one solid, sinister and central fact: that Lance Cleagle and Claudia Wayless had been deliberately involved in the thing for some purpose yet submerged with considerable as yet unrevealed circumstance.

He was not due to go on duty for better than an hour yet, and Lance turned broodingly into the Clay Mug saloon again, having decided on a talk with Hoagy Dern. This was one piece he had been totally unable to fit into the puzzle without assuming baselessly that Dern was connected with or was himself the man to whom Red Frost had waved his hypothetical signal through the depot window after noting from the recording pad that Lance Cleagle had received the expected message from Yellow Hill. There was the chance that he could dig a little information out of Dern that would either support or destroy this assumption.

The interior of the Clay Mug was big and sprawling and forested with big supporting timbers. It was empty now save for a few morning loafers, men employed on the afternoon shift down at the roundhouse, a few transients from the town's two hotels. Red Frost had left, but Hoagy Dern was seated at a table under the stair alcove, apparently writing a letter. Lance pulled out the chair across from Dern and settled into it.

Dern looked up gruffly. He was little older than Lance, a powerfully built man, swart and shallowly handsome. He was a man whose varied lusts came frankly to the surface under stimulation, shaping their own code and dicting their own blunt, self-serving courses of action. Lance Cleagle reflected grimly that even with no personal rivalry between them he could never have liked this man, whose mere physical presence lifted Lance's skin in a prickle of animosity.

Lance said, "Let's face a point or two, Dern. We hate each other. I think if there had never been a Claudia Wayless, we still would. Since we do, we're two people aimed at each other's ruin. We each have our own way of going about that. Unless I can persuade her that she'll be happiest with me, I don't want her. I think you want her under any circumstances."

DERN laid down his penholder and turned over the sheet on which he had been writing. He lifted puzzled eyes to Lance's, quickly scowling. "I don't go for your fancy talk, Cleagle, but I get it. And you're right. But why bring it up?"

"Because time won't wait, and I don't like what I think's going to happen."

"Well?" The word was spoken in soft wonder, and Dern let his unconsciously tensed shoulders go slack. It was apparent that he saw the point, that Lance was telling him that he was not being caught unwittingly, that he was set to fight the things he sensed were coming. This was what Dern had tried to read earlier. He now showed the momentary bewilderment of a man whose calculations have unexpectedly been upset, and he was a man built to counter instantly any aggression against himself. His lips peeled in cold amusement. "Not liking a thing won't keep it from happening, Cleagle."

Lance rose to his feet, and for an instant their gaze collided. "That's better. You could have accomplished nothing by going haughty. This is it, Dern. When the smoke clears one of

us'll be out of the running."

He went out into the street again, knowing he had gained nothing tangible but had scored a mental triumph over the man, a triumph that likely would not have come had he tried it with fists or guns, the weapons so snug in Hoagy Dern's big hands. He had startled Dern and destroyed his complacency and forced him unconsciously to commit himself. Later Dern might regret that he had taken the bait instead of feigning ignorance and innocence, but right now his pride had forced him to acknowledge and accept the challenge.

Lance returned to Mrs. Berg's boarding house to eat his delayed noon dinner, which left him just time to reach the depot to relieve Frank Skinner, whose trick at the key preceded his own. Number Two, running west, had come in, and Lance discovered it had brought George Saines, the division superintendent, and a couple of scowling individuals he assumed were railroad detectives. They were closeted with Al Diblee, the Sunup agent, when Lance took the key from Skinner. Lance turned to his duties with a prickle of apprehension running through him again. At any time, now, the cards would begin to fall.

The afternoon passed, with unintelligible conversation droning through the closed door to Al Diblee's office, with a pair of sour-faced detectives rushing out, remaining away for a time, hurrying back to brisk up the talk again. Then around four o'clock Diblee opened the door, his face set in the half embarrassed coldness of a man obliged to terminate cordial relations abruptly and prepare to take stern and impartial action.

"You can hear the Sunup call in here, Cleagle. Mr. Saines wants to talk to you."

Lance got to his feet, knowing that this was the climax. He crossed into the inner room, noting the stoney features of the men seated around a table in Diblee's office. Charley Saines was pushing a pencil point against the table top, staring at it absently, a portly, white-haired man with a square jaw and steady eyes.

"Sit down, Cleagle."

Lance knew that he was moving into the prisoner's box when he took the chair at the end of the table. Saines picked up a sheet of yellow paper and began to read thoughtfully:

"Claudia on number eight. You know what to do, Cleagle."

LANCE'S brow knit angrily. Saines read it all together, lending to it a unified import. Slowly Lance understood that this was the way he had recorded it when he had talked briefly with Joe Lilton the night before, though he himself had put a question between that would markedly have changed that import when he had asked, "What do I care?" These were the two sentences he had received and jotted down, and any explaining he could do now would look like desperate squirming.

Saines put down the paper and looked at Lance, taking a cold cigar stub from his lips. "The operator that relieved you turned this over to Diblee last night. It's your writing, isn't it?"

"Yes. I took it from Joe Lilton, over in Yellow Hill. But in between I asked him what he was talking about."

The superintendent smiled impersonally. "I think we've done a good job of making that clear, Cleagle. They tell me you're pretty much interested in a young lady named Claudia in this town. Also that she has been making a lot more money than you have. Which gives a good idea of how to read this telegram. A sizeable piece of money might be your means of winning the girl. So that tele-

gram could be read 'The means of winning Claudia is on Number Eight'! And we're rather inclined to believe that is exactly why you picked that word for your tip-off. We also have pretty definite ideas as to why she took just that train."

"I'd like to point out, Mr. Saines, that my relief also saw that message, quite a while before No. 8 reached the Jordan Creek trestle! I'm not accusing him of anything, but you've got to consider that the thing wasn't necessarily intended for me! That if it had been, I'd have been on guard enough to have destroyed it!"

"We have. There're other bits of damaging evidence against you, Cleagle. Who was the stranger you talked to on your way home last night?"

LANCE stared open-mouthed. "I didn't talk to any stranger!"

"There was a witness. We have testimony to the effect that you did!"

"Who is the witness?"

"That we don't have to reveal until your trial, Cleagle. I'm only telling you your case is hopeless, and you might as well come clean!"

"Have you arrested Joe Lilton?"

"Joe Lilton is dead. A suicide. Apparently he lost his nerve after he had played his tip-off part! We stopped off there this morning. He shot himself before we could talk to him. So that leaves you, and perhaps the girl, and it'll possibly go easier on both of you if you'll tell us who the actual bandits are!"

A sickening weight had dropped into Lance's stomach. The real criminals had boxed him in far more carefully and cleverly than he had ever anticipated! Claudia was being dragged into it! He had to think and act fast.

"That so-called witness to my meeting a stranger last night was Hoagy Dern!" he said hotly.

"So you noticed him, eh? This further incriminates you, for he said he thought you had. Time's wasting, Cleagle. If you insist on stalling until your cronies have got away it'll go all the harder with you!"

Lance was growing keenly aware of the terrible urgency of this moment. Though they had not said so, he was as good as under arrest. The pair of railroad detectives looked eager to start their own methods of pumping the information he did not possess out of him.

It was up to himself alone to upset Hoagy Dern's pernicious game, and the longer he let them have their way with him the harder that would be. His hands were on his knees, under the table, and he lifted them. He sent the table crashing onto its side in the detectives' direction, swung and reluctantly planted a stiff punch in Al Diblee's thin belly. Then he was plunging through the door.

He cleared the depot and raced down a side street, knowing that this one slim chance of finding the means of clearing himself also put him utterly at Hoagy Dern's mercy. Lance was temporarily seeming to admit guilt by making himself a fugitive from justice, and anyone would be justified in shooting him in trying to effect a capture. Hoagy Dern was smart enough to see that, ruthless enough to want to seize the chance to guarantee the complete success of his scheme.

Lance pumped legs up an alleyway and, changing course impulsively, ducked into an aperture between two buildings to think and find direction rather than to waste effort in a panic attempt to escape.

IT WAS late afternoon, but lacking several hours until darkness would give him somewhat of a protective

cover. Steeling himself to reason, he saw the utter emptiness of flight, which might give him a sort of fugitive liberty but which would be bitter medicine. His enemies had planned so carefully that he could not establish his own innocence. His only outlet was to build a case against Hoagy Dern, Red Frost, and the two unknown men who had assisted in the stick-up. To do that, he had to risk keeping within the limits of the town.

Consternation and panic ebbed slowly from him, giving place to bitterness and the swift intuitive flashes that come to men in moments of great tension. He heard thudding heels on the sidewalk beyond the building that sheltered him and knew that the railroad men had spread the alarm and were preparing the pursuit. The town would be combed, the countryside scoured, and there seemed no safety for Lance Cleagle.

He wanted desperately to talk to Claudia, feeling again that she knew more about the situation than she had told him that forenoon. Deciding that his best protection for the moment was movement rather than cowed hiding, he dropped to his belly and started to wriggle underneath the building.

He came out on the far side, squirmed on through a heavily grassed lot, then disappeared under a new group of buildings. When he emerged once more he staggered to his feet, took bearings to reassure himself, then rapped on the pane of a window just above him. If he had reckoned right, beyond it would be Claudia's office, and she would still be there, working on her books and dreaming her own dreams.

In a moment he saw her shadow, then a curtain was brushed back and she stood there. She raised the sash quickly, and without explanation Lance vaulted through. He straightened his rumpled clothing unconsciously, eyes somber, and even in his adversity the flaming desirability of her swelled once more in his veins.

"Lance! What on earth?"

"I'm on the dodge! Tell me, Claudia! Did you just happen to catch that train, last night?"

She turned back toward her desk, looking thoughtful. "Sit down, Lance. Whoever's chasing you, it's hardly likely they'd look in my office the first thing, seeing that everyone knows we've been on the outs. Before I answer you, tell me what's happened to you."

He did, taking seat close to her, explaining the circumstances known to the railroad people, Joe Lilton's strange suicide, the so-called witness who claimed to have seen Lance talking to a stranger on coming off duty the night before. But some stubborn masculine pride prevented his voicing his suspicions of Hoagy Dern who, so far as he knew, had replaced Lance Cleagle in her affections. In a moment he was glad that he had withheld them.

CLAUDIA'S face had drained, and shock and dismay were in her large brown eyes. "I'd have told you this when you were here this morning, Lance, if you hadn't taken a rather high hand about it. I've a few things on my mind, and since I've heard what you've just told me, I've been putting them together. The person who's trying to frame you is Hoagy Dern!"

An unexpected elation went through Lance at her speaking these words voluntarily. He smiled, knowing that under the stress of the bigger problem, the answer to a smaller one had come. Too late, for unless he could perform miracles within the next few hours he would be either a dead man or one permanently condemned. Yet elation passed with the acknowledgment that her re-

nouncing Dern did not mean she was accepting Lance Cleagle.

"Something very strange happened in Yellow Hill," Claudia resumed. "I didn't intend to return for a couple of days yet. But last night I received a telegram telling me to come at once. It was signed 'Whitey', and I took it to be my cook here, who sort of tends to things when I'm away. No. 8 was the first train, and thinking something was wrong, I caught it. Yet when I got home I found Whitey didn't know anything about it!"

"He couldn't have sent it!" Lance said. "If you received it in the evening, I'd be the one here in Sunup who'd have to transmit it. Joe Lilton faked it on the other end to get you on No. 8!"

"But why?"

"Look. The tip-off message was designed to implicate me. If all went well it could be given that implication. Yet there was a chance that something would misfire. By actually having you on that train, the message could be made to seem perfectly harmless. Just one key pounder informing another that his girl was coming home. Since all's gone well for them so far, they've taken the first choice and made it look very bad for me."

"But they knew I'd find out the telegram was a fake!"

"Sure, but think a minute. You probably wouldn't suspect that Joe Lilton had faked it. If you had made a fuss about it, it could be assumed that I sent it from Sunup, and it'd fall in perfectly with what they'd already cooked up. So far, so good. What made you think of Hoagy Dern?"

"In the first place, he's been unduly exuberated the last few days. A little more lavish than usual about what he could give me if I'd marry him. A woman has intuitions about such things, Lance. Somehow, he made me uneasy! Then this noon another strange thing happened. Hoagy either eats here or has us send a tray over to the saloon. Today he sent for one with a double order, which wasn't so strange considering what a big man he is and how he usually eats. But I went over to the mercantile at noon. I saw Hoagy eating in the hotel dining room as I passed by!"

LANCE'S eyes had narrowed. "His tapeworm sure must be howling today!"

"He's feeding a couple of men on the sly! I checked with the help and found out he also ordered a double tray for breakfast, this morning, but ate out himself. But I couldn't put it together until you told me what you did just now."

"And it makes a pretty picture," Lance said, with grim satisfaction. "He's hiding the pair of gunmen he had help him on that job, last night. Probably he had them slip into town at night, or otherwise meet him to prepare for the hold-up. He's hiding them until he thinks it's safe for them to clear out again. But the big point is that they're there, in the Clay Mug! Have you got a gun?"

Alarm sprang into her eyes. "What're you going to do?"

"Have a look."

"No, Lance! Go tell this to Al Diblee and the other railroad people! Get them to help you!"

Lance snorted scornfully. "Do you think they'd believe me? Besides, Hoagy and I declared personal war on each other, this morning. I want a hand in this, and George Saines'd never give it to me!"

Wearily she turned toward the desk and lifted a small gun from the drawer. Lance checked it quickly and thrust it into his pocket. He grinned, turning

toward the window. "Thanks, honey!"

She ran to him and abruptly was in his arms. "Oh, Lance! I'm scared, but I know I mustn't stop you! But I want to tell you something. I've known for quite a while I've been a fool to let ambition come between us! I want to ditch this whole business! I thought it made me happy, but it only gave me excitement and pre-occupation. I know now what I really want. So be careful!"

He kissed her softly, and calm, cool strength came to him. The bitterness was all gone, wiped away by a woman's faith and yielding in her man's blackest hour, even if that seemed to have come too late for him ever to claim her. He kissed her once more, released her, and looked cautiously out the window. Then with no further word he scrambled through it.

He dropped instantly flat as a group of riders clattered up the nearby street, men organized to scour the environs of the town. There was other milling, and he knew a search was being conducted, foot by foot, inside the town. He decided to make his way to the Clay Mug at once, for there was another spot no one would be apt to think of looking for him in at first. Again he wiggled under a group of high-foundationed frame buildings.

The back door of the Clay Mug opened into an alley cluttered with empty beer kegs, bottles and a couple of ricks of stove wood. It was not apt to be locked, but beyond it would be deadly menace, for Lance knew that Hoagy Dern or one of his hirelings could kill him now on sight and only receive credit for stopping a self-admitted fugitive. Yet beyond that door lay his only hope.

HE HAD been in Dern's saloon enough to know its layout. It was a two-story affair, with most of the lower floor given over to the big main saloon. Behind that was a hallway leading to a storeroom and a couple of small rooms used on occasion for private games. Hoagy Dern had rather lavish living quarters on the second floor, and there, too, were a few more private gambling rooms. At this time of day, Dern could be in any one of these, but it was more likely that he was out on the street with the excited crowd. Yet the two hired gunmen would be hiding in one of the private rooms, and it would be his first job to discover which.

Lance examined the prospect, slipped from the underpinning and lifted to his feet. A twist of the knob opened the door, and he slid inside, coming into the long dim hall. Four doors opened from it, three open and one shut. It was easy to determine that the three rooms were vacant, and since they were all game rooms the closed door would be to the storeroom. The men he hunted were upstairs.

This posed considerable of a problem, for he was neither athletic or reckless enough to attempt to gain entry through an upstairs window. Lance prowled to the end of the hallway, the gun out now, and silently opened the door a crack. A little cautious peeping informed him that the main saloon was deserted except for the bar tender, the rest having been drawn to the street by the excitement.

The bar tender was mopping up the long mahogany counter. That finished, he ambled down to the far end of the bar and turned to watch the street, scratching his back and yawning widely. Lance slipped through the door, cut left and moved into the alcove under the stairs, where Dern's private table stood. He waited a couple of seconds to see if his movement had sig-

nalled itself to the bar tender and discovered it had been covered by the racket in the street.

He was in a bad spot for the moment, for should somebody enter the saloon he could not retreat and would be caught redhanded. Not wishing to risk that, he took another look at the still lethargic bar tender, who was some twenty feet from him.

Realizing the futility of trying to catfoot that distance, Lance went forward on speeding legs. The barkeep whirled, surprised, and lifted his fat arms defensively. Lance hit him square in the soft midsection before the man could gather wits enough to raise an outcry. The man went down like a dropping bag of laundry. Lance laid the gun barrel across the back of his head, dragged him out of sight, then went up the stairs two at a time.

He had lighted the fuse, and he knew it well, for the bar tender would raise the roof when he came out of it, which would not be long as Lance had scrupled against bunging him any harder than necessary to secure a temporary free hand.

LUCK was momentarily with him. The first door he opened revealed a pair of men seated boredly at a table, playing cards. Both rose menacingly, hands sweeping toward their sixguns but the smaller model held steadily in Lance's fist froze them. As he kicked shut the door with his foot, Lance understood that they had relied on the bar tender or somebody else downstairs to warn them in case of an emergency, and so had been taken by complete surprise.

"Easy does it, boys!" Lance said softly. "I'm no sixgun shark, but I know how to handle this little baby! And it'll kill a man as dead as a cannon would!"

They were a rough looking pair, one rawboned and grayed but with a pair of vicious gimlet eyes, the other stubby and whiskered and with a twisted, hard mouth. They exchanged glances, and the tall one grunted:

"Who're you?"

"What does it matter, except that I'm real enough!" His pulses were racing, and he knew the odds were desperately against his carrying out his hastily prepared plan.

There was a brief moment of locked wills in which the hardcase pair openly displayed distaste for the prospect yet hesitated about bucking it. Lance had gambled on his hunch that Hoagy Dern would be out on the street somewhere, keeping a watchful eye on developments. Yet if something should bring him back, or if the barkeep, downstairs, should show unexpected stamina in recovering! Rather than to force this moment into an open physical crisis, Lance decided to play the one strong card in his hand at once.

"There's no point in our trying to kill each other off!" he said hastily. "We're in the same fix! I'm Lance Cleagle."

"You're in the fix, Cleagle!" the older man snorted.

"And you only think you're not!" Lance retorted. "Look! Why did Dern want Joe Lilton killed? To shut him up, but that was only part of it. You boys figured there was no use splitting the pot four ways when it could as easy be split three! Don't you blasted fools realize that Dern's got as much reason to want to shut you up as he had to want Lilton out of it? Safer for him, and *no* split!"

The pair exchanged a voluntary look of perplexity, then the stocky one snorted. "What is this? You think you can make us talk this easy, Cleagle?"

LANCE shook his head, grinning coldly. "No. But, look! Dern's got me boxed, and I'm smart enough to admit it. I'm a gone gosling if I hang around these parts! So I might as well have the game as the name! How about the three of us taking that gold and cutting out of here before Dern gets his chance to shoot us down?"

The long one looked at the stocky one. "Dagnab it, Stub, he's saying just what I been telling you! I don't trust that dang Dern, and what Cleagle says makes sense! Dern figured out that smart trick of beefing Lilton and making it look like he shot hisself—!"

"Shut up, Frank, you fool!"

Momentary satisfaction rippled through Lance. He had taken that trick! Yet his hunch that Joe Lilton's "suicide" had actually been murder had been strong. Now there was a good and strictly logical chance that he could split this hellion bunch! He turned attention to the stocky man.

"Frank's right, Stub. Maybe you've known Dern a long time, or maybe he just picked you up for this job. But you're both too smart to trust him, to sit here playing poker while he springs a double-crossing death trap on you! You got any reason to believe he won't?"

Uncertainty glimmered at last in Stub's small, hard eyes. "All right, what if Frank and me should decide to play it for ourselves? Why should we cut you in on it?"

Lance gestured slightly with the gun he still kept trained on them. "Here's one reason. I won't be a danged bit worse off if I bring that whole bloodthirsty pack outside down on this room! Maybe I'd be better off, for those lawmen might be able to crack the truth out of one of you! But the smart thing for the three of us is to take that bullion and get! Dern's got me framed, but I'd like to see his face when he finds out how little good it did him!"

"He's plumb right, Stub!" Frank growled.

For a long moment the two outlaws looked at each other, then Stub nodded his acceptance of the proposal. Lance smiled grimly to himself, not fooled for a minute by it. Knowing the processes in each other's mind, this pair had tacitly agreed to string along with Lance for a time, but for no longer than was necessary to get him off their necks. A quick, unexpected slug of lead in his back could tend to that, later!

"Where's the gold?" Lance asked bluntly, not wanting to give them time to reconsider.

Stub grinned. "Not here, Cleagle! And you're not learning where it is until we're ready to tell you!"

"Then where're your horses?"

"Where the gold is! Not too danged far to walk!"

Lance filed that bit of information and said, "There's no chance for the three of us to get out of this town together. Where shall I meet you?"

Stub's lips twisted in a grin. "Not much, Cleagle! We're not letting *you* spring the trap on us! Dangerous or not, we go together!"

Lance was satisfied, and it was what he had been playing for. The man downstairs should be coming out of it, now. The way Lance had him judged, he would not care to go it alone but would find Hoagy Dern and bring him. Sure that his seeds of suspicion had sprouted, Lance now had to bring about an encounter between the two contingents. It should not prove hard, and for this reason he had been taking his time even though the tension in himself built tighter with each passing minute.

THE man Stub seemed to be the brains of the pair, and after a

thoughtful moment he grunted, "If we go out a window in Dern's rooms we'll come down on the roof of the building next door. We can drop off it into the alley. Stick away that smokepole, Cleagle. We'll go together."

They would not be likely to turn on him until they got outside the town, Lance figured, and he pocketed the gun again, but he kept his hand in readiness to go for it should the need arise. They moved out into the hall, turned left. The door to Hoagy Dern's apartment opened easily and they moved inside. Stub lifted the window sash that gave out onto the roof of the little saddle shop next door.

Then a voice said, "Where you heading, boys?" It was amused, and Red Frost stepped into the room, a sixgun in his fist, catching the other three dead to rights.

"Frost!" Lance breathed. "You're one I didn't figure on! I expected they'd called you for my relief when I hightailed it!"

"I wasn't handy," Frost answered, his face lighted with savage amusement. "So they had to call Frank Skinner. Hoagy figured these two galoots might try to hightail it, and he posted me here. But he'll be here in a minute! I saw him coming across the street just now, in a hurry!"

"Don't you try no double-cross on us!" the man Stub blazed. Now that he had finally accepted the idea, he seemed completely dominated by it.

Frost grinned again. "If I got you boys' little march pegged right, who's talking about a double-cross?"

Then there were steps on the stairs, hurried and heavy, and Lance knew it would be Hoagy Dern. He would likely be alone, for it was unlikely that even the bar tender understood all that was going on. Lance Cleagle knew that the next few minutes would tell the story. Dread built in him, but he forced it down.

The door opened, and Dern stood framed there, and he seemed to take in the situation in a glance. "So they tried it!" His lack of surprise at finding Lance there indicated that the barkeep had recovered and gone for him, all right. "They played right into our hands!"

The man Frank opened the play-off, with Stub following quickly. The long, whiskered man stabbed a hand toward his gun, but had not reached it when Red Frost's gun spat fire. Frank buckled but before he had hit the floor, Stub was triggering. Frost had expected it, but as lead went into him a look of protest and surprise registered fleetly on his face. Frost stepped sidewise, then slumped slowly toward the floor.

HOAGY DERN had lifted a gun from his armpit so calmly that Lance felt reluctant admiration for his nerve. He got Stub before the stocky man could trigger again. Lance Cleagle had made no move, knowing the utter foolhardiness of taking cards in such a game, for had he moved he would have been the first one the other pair would have gunned down. Now Hoagy Dern smiled.

"It had to be sooner or later, and I'm glad it was sooner! For now they can be friends of yours, come here to try to frame me!"

"Why don't you gun me, too?" Lance asked coldly. "You've got a perfect set-up, here!"

"On account of a certain young lady wouldn't like the idea of *me* killing you, Cleagle!"

"I sort of figured you'd be smart enough to see that. So what happens? Do I go back to the railroad detectives?"

Dern nodded. "And the sheriff.

He's here, now. And let me tell you something, Cleagle! You're going to play ball from here on! There's nobody left but you and me who knows what's been going on! I can blast any claim that you can make!"

"But you can bet your bottom dollar I'll make them!" Lance snapped.

Dern shook his head. "No you won't! Listen! You probably been wondering why Claudia Wayless' name was rung in on this! Mister, when I play for stakes like these, I play it safe. I like that girl, but I like me better! You're one of them chivalrous cusses, Cleagle, and I think I've got you pegged right! The law dogs are suspicious of her, already. You'd take a jolt you didn't really have coming to clear her! Well —now you've got the chance!"

"How?"

There were sounds of activity on the street below, now, for the shooting had drawn searchers from other parts of the town. They'd be coming up the stairs presently, cautiously, for they could not know what was transpiring there.

Dern noted this and said bluntly, "When I turn you over to them pretty soon you're going to confess to the whole crime. It was you, Red Frost, Joe Lilton and these two dead pugugglies! If you try to pull me into it, it won't be me that comes! It'll be Claudia! Because the bullion's planted in a backroom at her place. We got in the back door with a pass key, last night. I'll claim the bunch of you tried to frame me! That one of you let that slip!"

Lance was staggered, knowing that Dern would very well do what he threatened if he had to do it to save his own rotten hide, and if the bullion showed up at Claudia's place, Dern had a better than equal chance of making his frame-up stick! It looked as though there was nothing else but for Lance Cleagle to take the blame.

Unless he could locate that bullion and move it before it was found!

Dern still held the gun on him, amused and looking relaxed, but Lance shot forward on desperation powered legs! The gun in Dern's hand spat. . . .

WHEN Lance Cleagle opened his eyes, he was amazed to find himself in bed between fresh sheets, to smell the aroma of flowers in his nostrils, and finally to see that the head bent close to him was only that of an earthly angel, Claudia Wayless.

"How in blazes did I ever come out of that?" he gasped weakly.

Claudia leaned forward, and her lips brushed his. "Oh, Lance! It's so good to hear you speak! After you left to go to the saloon, I went to the railroad people at the depot and told them the whole story! I had a hard time persuading them, for they thought I was mixed up in it with you! Finally I got them to agree to go search Dern's quarters. They'd just thrown a cordon around the building when they heard the shooting upstairs! And the sheriff and one of the railroad detectives had climbed onto the roof of the saddle shop just in time to hear Dern tell you how he was fixing to frame me! Dern's shot took off a lot of your hair, but the sheriff got him through the window before he could fire again!" She smiled softly. "Would you really have confessed to all that to save me?"

Lance smiled feebly. "I don't know. They were suspicious of you already. A man'll do strange things for a girl when—well—when—!"

"When what, Lance?"

"When he loves her better than life!"

She kissed him again, hungrily and tenderly. "And to think I ever figured any amount of money could be worth as much to me as that!"

"You're going to sell your bank!
And it had better be sold when I get back!"

SIGN ON THE BULLET LINE

By Wayne D. Overholser

Because Joe Berkey signed a contract everybody in town did—and then he was in trouble!

AT the time Joe Berkey thought it was a good idea. He had borrowed a chunk of money from the bank to buy the hotel, the most of it still unpaid. With the kind of interest he had to pay, a business just beginning to show a profit, and his loop on the prettiest, nicest, loveliest, and blondest girl in Three Peaks valley, he was of a mind to listen to any scheme that promised to save money for him. Which was exactly what Deke Ledyard promised.

Deke Ledyard had been in the Three Peaks country less than a year. He'd bought a store, and for eight months had been content to run that store. He was a pleasant, smiling man with a way of patting folks on the back and making them think they were something better than the usual run-of-the-mill members of the human race. Not only had he kept all the business of the store he had bought, but added to it customers who had been trading with Sam Gray or George Morgan or some of the others. Then he had come up with his money-saving scheme, and Joe had gone for it like a fish goes for the first worm on a hook in spring.

Joe remembered very well the day Deke Ledyard had come into the hotel three months before. Joe had just paid the interest on his note at the bank, and he had to look twice to see the cash he had left. He was thinking bitterly that it wouldn't be long until the bank had a hotel and he'd be looking for a job when Ledyard walked in, breezy and cheerful as ever.

"How's things, Joe?" Ledyard asked.

"Terrible," Joe snapped. "Want to buy a hotel?"

Ledyard had looked surprised. "What's wrong?"

"Everything. The folks who owned the hotel let it run down something fierce, and it's gonna take me a spell to let everybody know I'm running a different kind of business. Meanwhile Shafter over in the bank thinks he oughtta keep getting interest."

"That's too bad," Ledyard said with great sympathy. "It just happens, however, that I came in today with a proposition that'll save you a lot of money. I guess you'll be interested, won't you, Joe?"

Afterwards Joe had a hunch Ledyard had staged his entrance at this particular moment because he knew how Joe would feel, but at the time he

didn't think of it. He said, "Sure, Deke."

"I've been thinking," Ledyard said confidentially, "ever since I've been in Three Peaks that store prices were too high. Of course I could cut mine, but that would only lead to a price war and hard feelings. I've got a better idea. I'm going to start a special buying service."

Joe agreed that prices were too high. Some of the storekeepers like Rufe Vincent weren't interested in anything but making big profits. Others like George Morgan and Sam Gray had given the farmers a hand by letting them charge what they bought. The result was that Morgan and Gray had considerable loss, and had to keep prices up.

"Let's hear about it," Joe said.

"It's very simple," Ledyard said smoothly. "We'll form a buyers' association, I'll be the agent, and you'll give me your order once a month. I'll buy in The Dalles, freight your stuff in for you, and deliver it to your back door. You'll pay the cost."

Joe had been suspicious then, but not suspicious enough. He asked, "You in business for fun, Deke?"

"Well, no," Ledyard admitted. "I thought it would only be fair if I charged a small monthly fee for my services, say ten dollars. I've got the contract right here, Joe. Look it over, and if you like the idea, sign it. Of course I'll have to get quite a number signed up if I'm going to make it worth while."

THE contract seemed simple enough. It said that Joe authorized Deke Ledyard to act as purchasing agent for all needed hotel supplies and equipment. They were to be bought in The Dalles. Delivery would be made once a month directly to Joe's hotel. There would be no charge for Ledyard's services beyond costs and the ten dollars a month fee.

If Joe had kept the contract and thought it over he would have seen where Ledyard's scheme would take everybody in Three Peaks valley, but he wasn't in any mood to think things over. In the short time Ledyard had been in Three Peaks valley he had earned a good reputation. To Joe's way of thinking, all the other merchants except Sam Gray and George Morgan were ice-hearted skinflints who would squeeze the last nickel of profit they could from their customers. Besides, Joe was thinking of the prices he'd paid for the food that went through his dining room every month, of the new range he had to buy for the kitchen, and of the beds and bedding he'd have to get before long.

"Sounds all right to me," Joe said, and signed his name.

He'd made a mistake. He knew it now, and mentally labeled himself a fool and every other synonym for fool in the English language that he had ever heard. In the first place it wasn't going to save him any money. The third shipment Ledyard had brought him actually cost considerably more than Joe would have had to pay even in Rufe Vincent's store, and Vincent's prices were the highest in Three Peaks. Joe had complained long and bitterly, but Ledyard had said smugly that prices were up in The Dalles, and produced bills to prove it.

In the second place, and this was the worst, he'd forgotten when he'd signed the contract that the prettiest, loveliest, nicest and blondest girl in Three Peaks valley was Garnet Gray, Sam's daughter. Joe wouldn't have considered it important if he had thought about it because the amount of

goods he bought in a year from Sam Gray wouldn't make any big difference to Sam. Sam had a good store, and Joe had always considered him well-fixed.

When Garnet had first heard about Deke Ledyard's buying service, she hadn't liked it and she'd told Joe so. Joe had passed it off lightly by saying he needed to save money. Garnet had dropped the matter then, but Joe knew she wasn't convinced, and neither was Sam. He'd been noticeably cool from the moment he'd heard that Joe was the first to sign one of Ledyard's contracts.

In the three months since Joe had been buying through Ledyard his business had picked up, and he'd saved the money to buy the stove and bedding he needed. He didn't intend to pay Ledyard two prices for them any more than he intended to pay Rufe Vincent or the other merchants in Three Peaks two prices, and he was sitting at the desk looking over Ledyard's contract and wondering how he could get out of it when Garnet came in.

JOE got up and came around the desk when he saw Garnet. She was a tall, full-bosomed girl with blue eyes and honey-colored hair. She had a red-lipped mouth that always gave Joe's heart a bounce when she smiled at him. Today she didn't smile when she came in. She came directly to Joe, and without looking to see whether anybody was watching, put her arms around his neck and kissed him. It wasn't like Garnet to do that. Usually she played coy, and made him earn his kisses, but not today. It was a long, passionate kiss, the kind a woman might give a man she loved when she wasn't going to see him for a long time. When she pulled away, Joe tottered back and leaned against the desk. For some reason his knees had become rubber.

"Hmmmm," Joe murmured. "You have talents I never realized."

Garnet didn't say anything for a moment. She looked at Joe, at his lanky, long-boned body, at his face with the square chin and gray eyes and the curly brown hair that never seemed to be in place. Then she deliberately took the diamond ring from her finger, laid it on the desk beside the register, and said, "I love you, Joe, but I can't marry you. Good-bye."

A freezing process set in around Joe's heart. He grabbed Garnet by the arm as she turned away, and swung her around to face him. "I always wondered why you'd love a homely galoot like me," he said shakily, "and if you said you didn't love me I wouldn't say a word, but you just got done saying you did. Why can't you marry me?"

"Because you're a fool," she said, "who doesn't look ahead to what will come from the things he does. There will be trouble and bloodshed because of what you've done. Before it's over my father will be ruined."

Joe shook his head. "I guess mebbe I'm not very bright," he admitted. "Our children would have to get all their brains from you, but I still don't see why bloodshed and trouble and your father being ruined can be blamed on me."

"Then I'll tell you," Garnet said wearily. "Deke Ledyard is a smooth, smart crook. From the time he first came here he's been taking business away from Dad. He's the kind of parasite who comes to a country after it's safe and civilized. He hasn't risked his life coming here like Dad and your father and George Morgan did.

"I guess that's right," Joe admitted, "but I still don't see . . ."

"LOOK what's happened, Joe," the girl cried bitterly. "There's business enough for all the storemen here, but that didn't satisfy Ledyard. He had to think up this buying association that will break every merchant in town including Dad. He came to you first, and you signed a contract with him. He showed that contract to every man he went to after that. Most of them wouldn't have signed if they hadn't known you had."

"Now that's purty thick," Joe said defensively. "Just because I signed with him is no reason the rest of 'em . . ."

"Perhaps yuh're more important than you think you are," Garnet snapped. "You might remember that your father was the first white man in this valley. You might also remember that you were marshal of this town once, and you made yourself something of a reputation. It's been a very tame town since. You stand for something in this valley whether you know it or not. All Deke Ledyard had to do was to say Joe Berkey thought this scheme was fine, and they signed up right and left."

"But I didn't think . . ." Joe began.

"That's right," Garnet blazed. "You didn't think. Dad says Ledyard has more than one hundred families under contract. That's enough to smash him and the rest of the merchants if Ledyard keeps their business. It's your fault, Joe Berkey, and I can't marry you."

Garnet whirled and ran out of the hotel lobby, but not before Joe saw the tears in her eyes. He went back and sat down behind the desk. He picked up the ring Garnet had left and stared at it unseeingly. He hadn't realized how much Garnet had been in his mind, how his plans and his work and his dreams had all been for her. Now it was gone. Everything. The bank might just as well have the hotel for all the difference it made to Joe Berkey.

Then Joe Berkey remembered one very important thing. Garnet had said she loved him. There must we a way to undo what he had done, and when he found it she'd come back to him. He could get along without new beds and the cook could get along without a new stove. He'd use the money he'd saved to buy his contract back from Ledyard. If his actions had such an influence in Three Peaks valley, then the hundred families who had signed Ledyard's contract would follow his example.

Joe felt better after he'd thought about it. He slipped Garnet's ring into his coat pocket, and left the hotel. As soon as he got everything straightened up with Ledyard he'd find Garnet and tell her and she'd let him put the ring back where it belonged. Joe whistled as he walked into Ledyard's store. There was nothing in the world that equalled being in love, especially when the girl was pretty and sweet and blond, and could kiss a man as Joe Berkey had just been kissed.

THEN Joe's hopes were kicked into a messy pile of broken dreams. Deke Ledyard came out from behind the counter, and he was neither smiling nor friendly. He was packing a gun. One of Ledyard's clerks, a small, quick-moving man named Rolly Weems, walked toward Joe from the back of the store, and he was carrying a gun. Another clerk, skinny Mock Ish, stepped from behind the counter across the room and he was carrying a gun.

"I hope you're not here for the reason I think you are," Ledyard said ominously.

"Mebbe I am," Joe said. He had always liked Ledyard and he hadn't believed Garnet when she'd said he was

a crook. Now he was thinking Garnet had been right. He looked at Ish, then at Weems, and again at Ledyard. "What's the artillery for, Deke?"

"I'm done masquerading," Ledyard said bluntly. "I've got what I want, and I don't aim to lose it. From now on the bulk of the retail business in this valley will be in my hands. You go tell Sam Gray that."

"What makes you think I'm Gray's messenger?" Joe asked curiously.

"You're loco about Gray's girl, ain't you? It's simple enough. Soon as the shoe began to pinch Sam, he puts his girl onto you, thinking you'd quit me and that'd bring folks back. It's no good, Joe. You've contracted for me to buy your stuff in The Dalles, and that contract runs for a year. There's nine months to go on it. By that time I figger Sam and the other ones will be ready to quit."

"I thought I'd buy the contract up," Joe said. "My business isn't so much. I figured I'd pay your fee through the year . . ."

"You're wasting your breath, feller," Ledyard said. "I'm telling you straight, Joe. If you're planning on not having an order for me next month, you're crazy."

Joe began to see Ledyard for what he was, and anger boiled up in him. He said wrathfully, "And if you think I'm going to pay you more than I would have to pay right here in Three Peaks, you're crazy, Deke. That's what happened last time. What's more, you don't need to think that strapping a hogleg on you and your clerks is gonna make me pay and like it."

"You don't think so?" Ledyard's grin was a quick flash across his dark face, leaving it cold and barren. "I looked a long ways ahead when I came here, Joe. These boys ain't just clerks. They're both fancy gunslingers. Now if you think you've got anything to fret about, go get a gun and either one of 'em will oblige you. If you're satisfied, be sure you have your order for me the first of next month."

"If I don't?" Joe asked.

"Why, in that case," Ledyard said darkly, "you'll have trouble. Might be you'll die young. You're my key man, and you're staying in line. I've got more than a hundred families signed up, which means I'm taking in one thousand dollars a month for acting as purchasing agent. A tidy sum, Joe, which I don't aim to be beat out of. I'm not sure I can use that contract to keep you lined up legally, but there's other ways that'll work a damned sight quicker than the law. Think it over, son."

"I will," Joe said, and left the store.

IT TOOK a few minutes for Joe to return to the hotel and get his gun, and in those few minutes his thinking underwent a complete revolution. Garnet had been right. Deke Ledyard was a smooth, smart crook, and at the moment it looked as if the scheme he'd worked up was a good one. He'd broken no laws, and if the storemen got proddy enough to start swapping lead, Ledyard was fixed with a couple of gunslingers who could more than take care of Sam Gray or George Morgan or any of the others.

Joe wasn't just sure why he'd buckled on his gun except that he was the one man in town who had a chance of bracing Ledyard and his gun crew and coming out alive, a suicidal job he wasn't going to tackle until he had something more to go on than he had now. Sooner or later Ledyard would make a mistake if he hadn't already done so. He was money crazy, or he wouldn't have schemed this thing out the way he had, and being money hungry, he'd overreach himself sooner or

later.

There was no telling how far Ledyard planned to go, or how much of a strangle hold he intended to get on the valley folks. In any case, Joe couldn't afford to take his contract into court, nor could he afford to sit around and do nothing until Ledyard's gun dogs found the right kind of an opportunity to work him into a fight. The only way to lick Ledyard was to take the fight to him, and he thought he saw the way.

Joe was still thinking about Ledyard when Sam Gray came into the hotel lobby. Gray was a gaunt man, shoulders bent with the years, his mind filled with worry because of the things that had happened these last weeks. He asked hesitantly as if not sure what Joe would say, "Have you got time to come over to the store a minute?"

Joe's father and Sam Gray had been partners, and it would have pleased Joe's father if he could have known Joe and Garnet Gray loved each other. It had pleased Sam, but it hadn't pleased him the last three months, and his coldness had grown to the place where he barely nodded at Joe if they met on the street. Joe was surprised that Sam would humble his pride and come after him. The need for him must have been great, or Sam, in whom pride had always been an impelling motive, would not have asked for him now.

"You bet I have, Sam," Joe said.

As they crossed the street to Sam's store, Sam gestured toward Joe's gun. "I haven't seen you pack that since you quit wearing the marshal's star," he said.

"Looks like I might have a need for it," Joe said, "the way Deke Ledyard's working."

Sam showed his surprise. "I thought you were on his side."

"I had my eyes opened not more'n fifteen minutes ago."

SAM was grinning as he led Joe into his back room. "Here he is, boys. Speak your piece, George. I reckon it won't be as hard as we figgered. Joe's had a change of heart."

The four men in the back room were, along with Sam Gray and Deke Ledyard, the merchants of Three Peaks. George Morgan was the mayor and the only man of the group except Sam for whom Joe felt any great respect. The three neither liked nor trusted Morgan and Sam, and only dire necessity would have brought them together for any sort of common action.

"About time he had a change of heart," pudgy, red-faced Rufe Vincent growled, "after all the cussedness he's had a hand in."

"Shut up, Rufe," Morgan snapped, and turned his back to the red-faced man. "We're in trouble, Joe, and we've asked you in because you're the only man in town who can do us any good. We want you to serve at least temporarily as town marshal."

"I thought we had a marshal," Joe said.

Morgan shook his head. "Not now. I reckon Deke Ledyard's hand is behind what happened. Anyhow, Wheeler got his pay this morning, turned in his star, and rode out of town."

"You gents expecting trouble?" Joe asked.

"Trouble?" the red-faced Vincent bellowed. "Hell's bells, man, we've had it for three months."

"You figger I was the cause of this trouble, and that's why you think I'll get you out of it. That right?"

"You're damned right it is," Vincent said angrily. "If you hadn't signed Ledyard's contract first thing, he wouldn't have got half the people he did."

"Mebbe so," Joe said. "Mebbe not. Anyhow, I'll fix things, but I'll do it on

my own terms and in my own way."

"All right," Morgan said.

Sam Gray nodded, but the other three did not. They eyed Joe warily as if they suspected evil of anything he proposed.

"First," Joe said, "the reason I signed that contract was because I've had a rough row to hoe since I took the hotel on. I owed money to the bank, and our worthy banker has never been famous for showing mercy to anybody who couldn't pay on time. There wasn't anybody else in town I could borrow from, especially those," he nodded at Vincent, "who had the money to loan."

"All right," Vincent muttered. "Get on with your scheme."

"MY SCHEME is my own," Joe said, "but my terms will interest you. Store prices in this town have always been high. Some of it is due to a long haul, but most of it is because some of you would go to hell and back to make an extra nickel. Rufe, I never knew you to give credit to anybody, starving or otherwise. Same with you two." He nodded at the two men who sat beside Vincent. "It's been different with George and Sam. They've given credit and some of it they've lost. If they hadn't charged a little more than they had to, they'd both be broke by now."

"By hell," Rufe snarled, "the way I run my business . . ."

"Shut up," Sam Gray snapped. "Go on, Joe."

"The way I see it," Joe said, "is that you three," he nodded at Vincent and the two men beside him, "are no better than Deke Ledyard. Three Peaks could get along without you. If you want me to trim Ledyard down, you'll sell to George and Sam, and vamose."

"I'll be damned if I will," Vincent howled. "I've been in business here ten years, and I ain't . . ."

"Listen." Joe came up to the red-faced man, grabbed a fistful of shirt and hauled him to his feet. "I say that alongside of your heart a mustard seed looks bigger'n a moose. I say furthermore that no matter how a man runs his business, he'd better have a little mercy and love of his neighbor in him, or the town is better off without him. You stay here, Rufe, and Ledyard will bust you. You sell out to Sam and George, and you'll have something to start somewhere else."

"I don't have that much money, Joe," Sam Gray said.

"Then give him an I.O.U. Just get him and them other two dinero grabbers out of Three Peaks. I'll take that marshal's job, George, for a day or two. I'm gonna be out of town for twenty-four hours. You get everything fixed up by the time I get back, or I won't touch Ledyard." Joe moved back to the door. There he paused, and asked, "How does it happen that you boys called me over today, the marshal pulls out today, and Ledyard and his clerks go to packing their guns today?"

"It was Rufe's idea," Morgan said, jerking a thumb at the red-faced man, "to try gettin tough with Ledyard. I reckon Ledyard figgered it was time for him to get tough likewise."

"And you decided you wasn't man enough to handle Ledyard, didn't you, Rufe? Well, you ain't. If we're gonna have a clean sweep in this town, we'll sweep the old dirt out along with the new. Your part of the job had better be done by the time I ride back into town tomorrow, or I'll look Rufe up first thing, and bend the barrel of my .45 right over his noggin."

It was Joe's idea that Deke Ledyard wanted not only to keep his store and his new buyers' service, but in the long run he'd attempt to control the bulk of

the business of the town as well. If his hunch was right, he'd want the hotel, and knowing the position Joe was in, he'd be working on it already. It would account for the high prices he had made Joe pay for the last shipment of goods from The Dalles. That was why Joe stepped into the bank before he left town, and asked, "Shafter, who owns my note?"

THE banker looked down at the gun on Joe's hip, and swallowed. "Why, I . . . er . . . well . . . I had a good offer for it."

"Sure," Joe prodded, "so you sold it to Deke Ledyard. Right?"

The banker swallowed again, and said, "That's right."

"Why, you stinking polecat," Joe grated, "you'd steal the gold out of your grandma's teeth when she was asleep if you could get a nickel for it." He reached through the window and grabbing the banker by his beard, pulled his head forward. "You didn't ask Ledyard what he wanted it for, did you? All you looked for was a measly, two-bit profit. Look, Shafter. My dad and Sam Gray and George Morgan settled this valley, and they worked together for everybody's good. That's something you never heard about, so I reckon it's time this country had a new banker. In case you figger the same way, go see Sam Gray and George Morgan. Might be they could use a bank."

Joe released his grip on the man's beard, and stalked out. He took his horse from the livery stable, and left town by the lower valley road.

Twenty-four hours later Joe walked into Sam Gray's store. Garnet was beside Sam behind the counter, and when she saw him she gave him a smile that sent his heart into the old, familiar flip-flop.

"I'm ready to have a talk with Ledyard," Joe said. "How'd things work out?"

Sam scratched his head thoughtfully. "You sure put the fear of hell into some folks, Joe. George and me have got three stores we didn't have yesterday. Likewise we've got a bank. Shafter allowed we could run it and send him a report once a month on how things were going. Said he was taking a fishing trip over on the Metolius, and claimed he wouldn't be back for a long time."

"I danged near pulled his beard off impressing it on him," Joe said. "I just got done telling the valley folks there was gonna be a different deal here in both the bank and the stores."

"Joe, I don't know what you're planning to do," Garnet pleaded, "but don't do it. I'm to blame for starting you on this, and I'd never . . ."

Joe reached for her hand and dropped the ring into it. I can't quit now," he said. "When it's all wrapped up and finished, I'll take a look at your left hand and see whether it was worth it or not."

Joe went directly to Deke Ledyard's store. Ledyard and his two clerks, Ish and Weems, saw him and came from behind the counter exactly as they had the day before. One look at Joe's face told them this was the showdown.

LEDYARD motioned toward the star on Joe's shirt. He said, "You don't need to come around here packing that tin star, Berkey. What's more, you've been in the valley trying to make trouble for me. I won't stand for it, and if you had any sense you wouldn't have tried it."

"You don't need to worry about me making trouble, Deke," Joe said grimly, "because you've got trouble and plenty of it." He laid a pile of papers on the counter. "I've been comparing

prices on that last shipment with identical items you bought for the valley folks. You're the one who isn't smart because you sure plumb overreached yourself this time. You wanted to keep the valley folks satisfied, but you also bought my note from the bank. You charged me way too high, which same you figgered you'd keep doing till you fixed me so I couldn't pay off my note. Then you'd have a hotel. I'm arresting you for robbery, and I reckon when we get you up for trial, I'll have a mighty good case . . ."

Deke Ledyard must have thought it would make a good case because he went for his gun. So, too, did Ish and Weems, but they were far too slow. Joe Berkey had cleaned one lawless element out of Three Peaks and he was fast enough to do it again. He laced a slug into Ledyard's heart before the man's Colt cleared leather. His second shot put a little, round hole between Rolly Weems' eyes. Then he felt the numbing impact of Mock Ish's bullet smashing against his ribs, but he kept his feet. With his left hand on the counter to steady him, he blasted life from Ish with two quick shots.

Joe was still on his feet when they came in: the medico, George Morgan, Sam Gray and the rest, but he waved them away until he saw Garnet and the ring on her finger. Then he grinned. "Go ahead and have a look, Doc. We've got the old dirt swept out along with the new dirt." Wounded as he was, Garnet's smile was still enough to give his heart the old, familiar bounce.

★ THE WHISTLING SHERIFF ★

MAXSON was an unusual man. He played no small part in the settling of the West. With his blazing gun, he established law and order in the Dakotas and gained the respect of gunman and righteous citizen alike. The capture of Stub Shay and Tom Quinn did much to place his name among the great peace officers of the West.

When these two raided one of the largest ranches in the territory and made off with a choice group of horses, Maxson, accompanied by two cowpunchers, set out in pursuit. The trail was a difficult one to follow for by the time Maxson arrived on the scene it was at least a day old. Somehow these three men were able to follow the faint hoof marks, and after riding hard for 125 miles they came to the edge of the bottom lands of the Missouri.

As Maxson and his companions emerged from Deer Pass and stopped to survey the scene, they made a sorry sight. Their horses were tired and panting; the men were exhausted from their forced ride. Before they could decide in which direction to proceed, a bullet shrilled above their heads. Less than 300 yards away was the camp of the outlaws. In front of their fire stood Shay and Quinn with their Winchester rifles poised.

The sheriff and his men were in a tough spot. Maxson unbuckled his belt and with his revolver flung it to the ground. Coolly he dismounted and tossed the bridle of his horse to one of his companions. Then, ordering them to remain where they were and not to fire unless they saw him fall, he walked toward the outlaw camp.

All this activity was watched very closely by the two horse thieves. They were completely taken aback by Maxson's action, or lack of action. They were puzzled when they saw him strolling in their direction, whistling softly as he came.

"Fifty feet more, Sheriff, and you are a dead man," cried Shay. And then a moment later: "For God's sake, Maxson, go back. We don't want to hurt you but we'll never be taken alive."

Still whistling Maxson advanced. The sheriff kept his eyes fixed on Shey's face as he strode straight to the muzzles of the rifles, brushed them aside, and handcuffed the two men.

Two nights later the ranchers felt justified in taking law into their own hands. An angry mob consisting of at least 100 ranchers gathered and surrounded the one-story frame building that did double duty as jail and sheriff's residence. Maxson was busy playing poker with the two prisoners. The noise of the crowd outside became louder and louder. Danger threatened. Suddenly, the sheriff, with a revolver in each hand, appeared in the doorway. In a low but firm voice he gave the would-be lynchers his ultimatum. They would have but sixty seconds to leave. Not one of them risked disobedience of this order, and soon the street was cleared of the unruly mob. In due course Shay and Quinn were given a fair trial. They were convicted and sentenced to long terms in the penitentiary. Contrary to the usual rule of peace officers dying with their boots on, getting shot in the line of duty, Maxson died a natural death, as peacefully as if he had spent his whole life in one of the quiet villages of Pennsylvania.

FAMOUS FRONTIER

JAMES KING OF WILLIAM

This is the true story of one of the most amazing characters of the old West—a newspaper editor.

IN THE yarns that are spun about the lawless West, there is one that inspires the crusading hearts of all time. Those men who champion right and justice at the peril of their own lives will find a parallel in the life of a man known as James King of William, a newspaper editor. He was a man of great courage and of dauntless spirit. It is said that his peculiar name was due to the fact that during his adolescent years there was another boy among his circle of friends with an identical name, James King. To help distinguish between the two, of them, he added his father's name and thereafter, even though these two friends separated, he was always known as James King of William.

King, with the adventurous, fortune-seeking men of his time had wandered westward in the quest for that precious yellow ore, gold. With the hordes of Forty-Niners he tried his luck at mining, but physically he was not made for that sort of thing and soon turned toward the city. San Francisco was a boom town then; it was buzzing with every type of activity—legal and otherwise— when King appeared. He opened up a private banking house, brought out his family, and entered the life of the town. For a time his business prospered and he acquired a small fortune, but in 1854 he made several unfortunate guesses about investments and was forced to close down. King did the honest thing, an unusual occurrence in those days, for in his own day it was hardly expected of him. He surrendered to his creditors all his worldly possessions and accepted the only type of work available to him, a salaried position with another banking firm, Adams and Company.

How he became editor of a newspaper and all the other details of his life cannot be recounted until a little more is known about the town of San Francisco and the elements which were at work there. The whole core of the trouble in that community lay in the law, the way "justice" was carried out. The law at that time was a shrewd little game played by lawyers, and there was no attempt to see Right and real justice triumph. There were very few, if any, convictions in the course of a year. Juries were packed; witnesses were scattered or done away with when necessary; trials were often delayed until the charges were forgotten. All the lawyers were in politics and worked together to aid the criminal. Even the sheriff was on the inside. Conditions were so bad that between 1849 and 1856 when over one thousand murders had been committed, only one legal conviction had been secured.

The people of the town, the honest men and women gave up the whole situation as a hopeless cause. After many, many attempts to see justice done, the ordinary people realized that all the chips were stacked against them; they were helpless. As long as the community continued to be prosperous, the people felt they could look ahead to better times. In those days every man was supposed to look out for himself. In 1855 things began to really look bad for the community. Few people noticed it, however. Many miners had stopped work and now had to ask for credit to buy their necessities. The vicious circle of complicated finances began. The retailers in turn needed credit from the wholesalers, and the wholesalers had to extend their debts in the East until the stores were able to pay. All the banks were private and not subject to government supervision. Things began to get tangled.

Out of the clear sky, Adams and Company, the firm for which James King of Williams was now working failed. It had been the largest and most powerful banking firm in that section of the country, and now for no apparent reason it had folded up. With legal subterfuge, every spark of shrewdness that could be brought into play by a group of clever lawyers, all the bank's capital was allowed to vanish.

Of course, people had a hard time understanding James King's stand; they had assumed him to be one of the very few truly honest men around. Now they began to wonder. Through a series of pamphlets and short newspaper articles, he was able to clear himself. He expressed his opinions clearly and without fear and hinted at a great deal more than had been obvious to the public eye. With the honest public on his side, he had no difficulty in raising the sum of money necessary to start a newspaper of his own.

The paper was known as the *Daily Evening Bulletin* and made its appearance in October of 1855. As a newspaper it was not very much. Most of it consisted of advertisements. But the editorials really packed a punch. King started out with an attack on company tactics, mentioning names, places, and incidents to back up his accu-

FIGHTERS By Cleggett Clark

sations. Shortly after the circulation of the first edition, a representative of the company appeared, visited King in his office, and threatened him with death. He also tried to offer a bribe, but to no avail. He made no progress with the daring editor.

Every day new exposures were found in the editorials of the *Daily Evening Bulletin*. The control the firm had over the politics in the town, the crooked men connected with politics, banking, and lawmaking, were fully described. The people of the town further learned the financial methods of the times and how untrustworthy they were. The newspaper became very popular; its subscription list was growing longer and longer; as soon as it appeared on the street it was eagerly purchased.

King's attack dealt with all the off-color activities in San Francisco. His editorials even concerned themselves with the ordinary criminals and desperadoes who plagued the town. He never pulled his punches. Always clearly and without hesitation, King supplied names and incidents, times and places. Accounts like these could not be published forever, and the ever-growing group of enemies plotted against him. No violence had been attempted against him yet, but he was constantly in danger.

Mere threats had no effect upon him; he continued his work as if nothing had been said. A dozen men publicly announced that they intended to kill him. All over town, in the gambling resorts and on the streets, bets were made as to the probable length of King's life. When criminals vowed openly that they would shoot him on sight, he published the following paragraph in his paper:

"We pass every afternoon about half-past four to five o'clock along Market Street from Fourth to Fifth Streets. The road is wide and not so much frequented as those streets farther in town. If we are to be shot or cut to pieces, for heaven's sake let it be done there. Others will not be injured, and in case we fall our house is but a few hundred yards beyond and the cemetery not much farther." This boldness astonished the people of San Francisco. James King of William had actually invited these thugs to kill him. He had named the time and place which would be most convenient for his own murder!

Incidents occurring in the town and written up as bluntly as possible in King's paper had made the honest portion of the population of San Francisco good and mad. A gambler named Charles Cora had shot down William Richardson, the U. S. Marshal, in cold blood. Public fury ran very high; there was even talk of a lynching party. But in the long run, it was felt that the crime was so obvious that Cora would not be able to escape the death penalty. The excitement died down. In the meantime large sums of money were being spent in Cora's behalf; a crafty lawyer was pulling every possible string for him and the trial was delayed time and time again. Cora lived a very comfortable life within jail walls. He was a personal friend of the sheriff and his deputy. When the case finally did come to trial, Cora was released through a jury disagreement. King's editorials blasted the case day after day, but the people were powerless to do anything.

About three months following Cora's release the editorials in the Daily Evening Bulletin launched themselves on a new attack. It was aimed at a certain James P. Casey who was elected to the Board of Supervisors of the town from a district where it was said that he was not even a candidate. In a previous election, although he had not been a candidate and private investigations could unearth no man who would acknowledge having voted for him, he had been returned as an elected supervisor. It was later discovered that he was not even a resident of that district.

Casey read the editorials against him in the *Daily Bulletin* with the full knowledge that people all over the city were reading the same items. He proceeded at once to King's office intending to shoot him on sight. King happened to be busy at the time and his back was turned to the door. This would have been the opportune moment for Casey, but he must have been quite the blackguard that the deed demanded. He hesitated and then gave up the idea. Perhaps he was afraid of King's piercing black eyes. About five or six words were exchanged between him and the irate editor before he was thrown out of the office.

Outside a crowd was waiting. They had heard of Casey's plan and thought the murder had already taken place. Casey, afraid of appearing the coward before all these people, told them that King had apologized. He continued his bragging in the local bar as he drank himself into a tipsy state. With a few of his cronies who were also in league against King a plot was cooked up whereby Casey was to challenge the fearless editor on his way home from work that night. He took his place inside of the doorway of one of the buildings which King was to pass on his way home, on the route that the editor had designated as the most desirable place for his death to occur.

People began to gather at the scene. The sheriff was sent for, but knowing him it was doubted whether anything could be done. It is possible that even King was warned by a sympathetic citizen. At just five o'clock King turned the corner. As he started to cross the street, Casey stepped forward out of concealment. Throwing

back his cloak he yelled "Come on!" and fired. King staggered and fell. He had been shot through the chest. Casey looked down at his victim, put his gun back in its holster, and walked toward the police station. All he wanted now was a "fair" trial, one he felt sure could be fixed for him.

This time the people were really aroused. A champion of the people had been cut down; King was a fearless and noble man, and the citizens recognized these virtues. The news of the shooting spread across the city like wildfire. An immense mob gathered. The police officials realizing they were in for a great deal of trouble, hustled Casey out the back door. A carriage was brought to the entrance of the alley, and the prisoner closely surrounded by armed men, was rushed away from the city to the county jail. The mob followed and gathered once more in the square in front of the county jail. The militia was called in to maintain order for it was feared that the citizens would storm the jail. Nothing did happen, however, since the crowd was without adequate leadership.

Laboring quietly behind the scenes a small group of men met and decided what to do. These were the same men who aided the community in a similar crisis several years before. . . . the Vigilante Committee. With care they selected men who would be able to keep their heads and take orders no matter what came. Two thousand men were in their ranks before many hours had passed. Cleverly and without bloodshed, the Vigilantes gained control of the County Jail. Many people, including the prisoners themselves, expected a lynching to take place. A few days passed and nothing occurred.

All this time the Vigilante Executive Committee was meeting and deliberating. A new trial was held for Cora and all the evidence presented in an orderly fashion without the interference of scheming lawyers. While the jury was in session, James King of William died of his wounds. Without further ado the death sentence was decided upon for both prisoners. This may have seemed like unorthodox court procedure, but it was Vigilantes justice. The conviction of both men took place that night, and the execution was ordered, but in secret.

For the funeral of the murdered editor, people came from miles around. Hundreds of horsemen, carriages, and foot marchers got themselves quietly into line hours before the procession was to begin. The church was filled to overflowing early in the day. They stood silent and patiently waited.

A few blocks away activity could be noted at the Vigilante headquarters. Shortly before the procession was scheduled to pass below, the upper windows of the building were thrown open and small planked platforms were thrust from two of them. Directly above heavy beams were shoved out from the flat roof. Rope nooses dangled from the ends of the beams.

When the organ music could be heard from the little church but a few blocks away denoting the fact that the funeral services had begun, Cora and Casey were led to the windows. Blindfolded, Cora was conducted to the end of one of the little platforms. A moment later Casey appeared. He had intended to put on an act of bravery and asked not to be blindfolded. When he reached the end of the platform his nerve broke and he began to babble. At the fiirst stroke of the church bell, the platforms dropped and Cora and Casey met their death. As the funeral procession moved toward the Lone Mountain cemetery, many thoughts were brewing in the minds of the men of San Francisco. The crooked lawyers, bankers, and politicians were planning to follow the quickest route out of town; most of the others were deeply sorry to see the passing of this brave man, a man courageous enough to face death in order to see justice prevail.

MAMMOTH WESTERN

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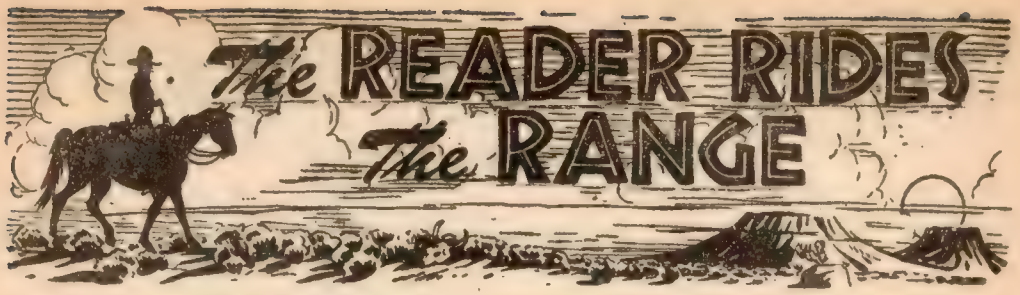

HIS FAVORITE

Sirs:

Noticing your new magazine, MAMMOTH WESTERN, on the newsstand, I bought a copy. I have a number of your magazines, *Amazing Stories, Mammoth Detective* and *Fantastic Adventures,* that I like very much, but my favorite is MAMMOTH WESTERN. I have a copy of *Amazing Stories* that to me is amazing in size. I think it must have been three or four years ago I got it. To me it is a wonderful book, so long in contents and best of all only 35c.

I have been reading all my life and I am not young either. My mother and father are both dead.

I will look for the next issue of MAMMOTH WESTERN when it is published. I never miss any good western stories.

Charles Grant, Jr.,
469 4th Ave.,
N. Troy, N. Y.

We are pleased to note that our new magazine is a favorite with you. As for size, now that the war is over, we expect very soon to be publishing this magazine in a size that really lives up to its title. It's been a long time since the war cut down on our paper supplies—and a long time for you to have been reading us so faithfully.—ED.

YOU'RE IN AGAIN!

Sirs:

Congratulations on the new baby—MAMMOTH WESTERN. It's a right husky child and off to a fine start. Maybe I'm a little partial, being sort of in the family, but I liked everything in it. Even my own yarn sounded pretty slicked up—maybe it was the good company.

Already I'm looking forward to the second issue, and to future appearance in MAMMOTH WESTERN —which I predict won't be a baby long.

Ennen Reaves Hall,
Durango, Colorado.

The readers said you belonged in that first issue, so we put you in again! Come again, we think you're good too!—ED.

LIVED WITH THE CHARACTERS!

Sirs:

Congratulations on your new publication, MAMMOTH WESTERN. Only there is something more important that I want to congratulate you upon: *Bullets Don't Need Names,* by R. M. Hankins! Honestly, of all the western stories I've ever read, this story is the best. I actually lived with the characters! More power to your publications: I read every one of them.

Mike Wharton,
Haskell, Oklahoma.

Them words is prime beef to us, Mike!—ED.

WE APPRECIATE THIS!

Sirs:

The advent of MAMMOTH WESTERN means that Ziff-Davis is undertaking another enterprise that is bound to be successful.

Nat McKelvey,
1317 E. Spring St.,
Tucson, Arizona.

Your confidence in us is sure heart-warming, Nat! And we hope you'll keep on sending us some of those fact pieces of yours. We'll be using your name, unless we're much mistaken!—ED.

THINKS WE HAVE SOMETHING

Sirs:

I have just finished reading the MAMMOTH WESTERN magazine. I think you have something there; a magazine that won't hang around the newsstand long. I liked it very much, so much that I am entering my subscription for one year. I see, too, that you are giving new writers a break. Either that, or the old ones are using new pen names. Anyway, your stories are of the real West, and for the sake of tradition, keep it that way. Don't let the jitterbug slang creep in.

I should have done the criticising first, but this is too good to let pass by. Next time you want to throw down a manuscript because of a misplaced comma or a misspelled word, reread your own errors in the September Issue. Especially the story "Deal 'Em Deep . . . But Not Dirty!"

A. A. Parr,
211 E. 55th St.,
Los Angeles 11, Cal.

Yes, we give new writers a break. We give all writers a break. And we never throw down a manuscript for misplaced commas.—ED.

SONS of the WEST

WILD BILL HICKOK

By Alexander Blade

The true life story of one of the most well-known figures of the old West—one of history's Americans

(SEE BACK COVER)

JAMES BUTLER HICKOK, familiarly known as Wild Bill, was born at Troy Grove, La Salle County, Illinois. In his early youth he emigrated further west to Kansas and Missouri. General G. A. Custer, who was a personal friend of Wild Bill, describes him in his memoirs as follows. "He [Wild Bill] was six feet one in height, straight as the straightest of the warriors whose implacable foe he was; broad shoulders, well-formed chest and limbs; a face strikingly handsome; sharp, clear, blue eyes, which stared you straight in the face when in conversation; a finely-shaped nose; a well-turned mouth, with lips only partially concealed by a handsome moustache. His hair and complexion were those of a perfect blonde. Add to this figure a costume blending the immaculate neatness of the dandy with the extravagant taste and style of the frontiersman, and you have Wild Bill, then as now the most famous scout on the Plains."

During his youth, Wild Bill started to handle firearms, and it was not long before he became very proficient. In fact, during his youth and manhood, he was recognized as the deadliest shot on the plains. Once a certain George Nichols asked Wild Bill for a demonstration of his shooting ability. Wild Bill promptly replied by designating a certain sign and saying,

"That sign is more than fifty yards away. I'll put six shots into the inside of the circle, which isn't bigger than a man's heart." He very easily carried out his boast by putting six shots right in the circle, without even taking aim—he shot from the hip.

This ability to shoot from the hip helped Wild Bill very much because in his surroundings the one who could shoot the fastest and the straightest lived the longest. Although Wild Bill was considered the best shot in the country, he did not brag or become over-confident about it. He merely accepted it as a part of his life.

Bill first gained widespread popularity when he left his home in order to travel down to Kansas-Missouri where there was much trouble brewing over the slavery question. He joined the "Red-legs", a band of hard riders who were in opposition to slavery. It was while with this gang that his almost miraculous ability to handle a pistol became known to the men on the plains.

He associated with the Red-legs for a spell, but then turned to pony-express riding which was a relatively dangerous occupation in those days when at any moment along the trail, Indians were apt to attack. Although Bill was only nineteen, he succeeded very well on this job.

Then the Indians began an uprising along the territory of the Pony express. The Indians commenced to kill riders, burn stages, and therefore caused a temporary halt to traveling.

Because of his known ability and bravery, Wild Bill was chosen to put down this Indian uprising which was seriously threatening the westward expansion. He chose about fifty men to accompany him on his excursion against the hostile Indians. The band of fighters, led by young Bill, left St. Joseph, Missouri in hot pursuit of the savages in September, 1858. They finally caught up with the Indians at Crazy Woman's Fork, but much to their surprise, the band of Indians outnumbered them five to one. Bill threatened to kill anybody who wanted to return because of the uncomfortable odds.

With all the ingenuity of a natural-born fighter, Bill laid his plans of attack. He ordered each member of the party to follow him into the Indian encampment; they were to fight only with their pistols, and were to stampede the animals which were in the corral. These orders were efficiently carried out: the animals were frightened by the men, and, when the Indians came out of their wigwams to learn what was going on, they were killed before they could obtain their firearms. One of the fighters who was in the middle of this battle was young Bill Cody, later nicknamed Buffalo Bill. The victorious band returned to St. Joseph with all the stolen horses and thus ended the attacks by Indians on stage coaches.

LATER Wild Bill obtained a job with that famous company, Majors and Russell. He drove an express over a long and perilous route from Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Once, on this run, Bill encountered a huge cinnamon bear with two cubs. The bear remained on the

trail with no intent whatsoever of moving. Thinking it was a somewhat simple and elementary task to slay a bear, Bill dismounted and proceeded to shoot the bear in the head. The bullet, however, only glanced off the bear's thick skull. Bill therefore fired again, but still the bear remained unaffected by the shots. By now the bear was angry and charged toward Bill who immediately brandished his knife. In a few moments the two were clasped in mortal combat: Bill continually drove the knife up to its hilt in the bear, but the maddened animal kept on struggling, inflicting almost fatal wounds on Bill's body. Blood covered the ground, but finally the battle ended. It was rather difficult to distinguish who was the victor because Bill as well as the bear was covered with blood. The bear, however, died, and Bill was still living, although he was near death. His partner, who was several miles back, drove up and put him in the coach and drove to Santa Fe. It was several months before Bill was able to return to his job.

During the war, Wild Bill had incurred the displeasure of a band led by the outlaw, David McCanles. They had vowed to kill Bill and one day, while he was visiting a friend, they saw their chance. They surrounded the cabin and were intent on "skinning Bill alive". Bill, calmly and coolly, took the only rifle off its hook and prepared to defend himself. Seeing the leader near the cabin, Bill yelled at him.

"Come in here, you cowardly dog and fight me."

The leader was no coward and he rushed into the cabin with his gun in his hand, but the quick-triggered Bill shot him dead before he had a chance to fire. Filled with hate and vengeance at seeing their leader killed, the angered would-be assassins surged into the room with pistols drawn. Using his remarkable ability to shoot quickly and accurately, Bill soon disposed of four of the ten attackers. But Bill received several blows on the head and chest and many cuts. Although he was bleeding heavily, he fought on, slashing with his knife with all his strength. When the smoke of battle cleared, Bill surprisingly discovered that he was the only remaining living person in the room. He had shot five men and cut to death the remaining six.

DURING the Civil war, the territory around Kansas and Missouri was filled with strife, conflict, and death. Under such perilous conditions, men like Wild Bill were incessantly needed. He served under General Curtis and in one engagement with the Confederate forces under General McCullock, he was exceedingly successful as a sharp-shooter. Early in the conflict he managed to obtain a strategic position on a hill and, being concealed from the enemy, he stayed in this place for four hours and, it is reported, killed over thirty-five Confederate soldiers. In fact, he even killed General McCullock.

Because of this feat, he was singled out by General Curtis and sent as a spy behind the Confederate lines. He worked his way into Arkansas and became a member of the Confederate army. Because of his engaging personality, and fighting ability, he soon won the admiration of his commander. While his outfit was preparing to attack the Union forces under General Curtis, General Price, the Confederate leader, gave Bill an urgent message which he was to deliver to the other Confederate commander, General Shelby. Realizing the importance of the documents, Bill concluded that he must reach the Union forces in a hurry.

Bill managed to maneuver a Confederate soldier into a challenge about who could get the nearest to the Union lines, the Confederate or he. The Confederate soldier reluctantly accepted the challenge when his comrades teased him. So they both started to ride toward the Union lines while the unsuspecting Confederate soldiers looked on. The Union forces, however, immediately began to fire upon the men. Bill yelled at the Union forces to cease firing, and the Confederate, realizing he had been tricked, drew his gun, but once again Bill's expert gun handling paid him dividends—the Confederate fell from his horse with a bullet through his head.

Bill was heartily greeted and received by General Curtis. Because their plans were known, the Confederate leaders were forced to withdraw their troops and discard their well-laid plans of attack.

IT WAS not long before Bill once again disguised himself and entered the Confederate army as a private. A Confederate soldier who had witnessed his previous daring run recognized him and brought his identity to light. He was tried and sentenced to die the next morning.

During the night, Bill managed to obtain a knife, which the rebel guards failed to notice, and set himself free. He killed the guard, donned his clothing, and raced toward the Union lines where he arrived safely and imparted very much valuable information to the Union leaders.

Toward the end of the Civil war, a certain Indian chief, Conquering Bear, came to Fort Leavenworth and informed General Curtis that a band of Indians was preparing for war. Curtis called Wild Bill, who said he would go back with Conquering Bear to uncover the real significance of the story. Although Conquering Bear said he would gladly lead an army of Union soldiers in an attack upon the rebellious Indians, Bill insisted that only he go along—his suspicions were aroused.

Bill's premonition turned to fact when, after traveling for a while, the Indian let out a whoop and suddenly Bill was surrounded by a band of murderous Indians. Bill instantly brought into action his remarkable gunnery and, with the darkness as an aid, managed to escape with his life. Bill was enraged by this cowardly attack upon his life and, with the aid of a friendly Indian, succeeded in luring the traitorous Indian to a quiet clearing. Here he challenged Conquering Bear to a duel even though he could have, without the

least bit of remorse, shot the Indian right there. Knowing Bill's incredible ability at shooting, the chief selected a knife as the weapon with which the duel was to be fought. The ensuing duel was a gruesome, gory affair, but Wild Bill finally slew the chief although he suffered some rather serious wounds himself.

In 1865, Bill had his renowned duel with Dave Tutt. It appears that Dave, who was previously a Confederate, and his friends urged Bill into a duel. Dave had stolen Bill's watch and this was ultimately the cause of the fight. It took place in Springfield, Missouri, and only two bullets were fired: one went over Bill's head, the other went through Dave's heart.

Because of his now widespread fame, Bill was selected as marshal of one of the wildest cities in the west, Hayes City. Immediately things commenced to boom. A killer named Sam Strawhorn threatened that he would kill Bill the first time he saw him. Bill, on the other hand, was intent on cleaning up the City and ushering in law and order. When Bill became marshal, Strawhorn came to town to kill Wild Bill. Wild Bill was in a saloon when the confident and swaggering gunman strode in. He walked over to within a few yards of Bill and raised his pistol, but before he could fire, Bill sent a bullet through his brain.

Another time a desperado from St. Louis came into town, became intoxicated, and set out to shoot up the town. Upon hearing this, Bill hurriedly came to the place where the ruffian stood with two guns threatening to kill anybody who came near him. Bill calmly approached the desperado and when the ruffian told him not to come any closer, he put his hands up and said,

"Don't shoot him; he's only in fun!"

The ruffian, completely fooled, turned about and in that instant Bill put a bullet in his brain. Such were the numerous incidents and fights of the versatile Wild Bill. He later went to Abilene which he ruled with a strong hand and killed many gunmen in the process.

He left his post as marshal and from 1872 through 1873 traveled with Buffalo Bill in the east in a wild west show. But after a while he returned to the west, going to Deadwood, a reckless outlaw town with no law enforcement whatsoever. One day Bill Hickok was sitting at a game of cards when Jack McCall, a noted killer, sauntered into the saloon and standing in back of Bill rapidly drew his gun and fired a bullet through Wild Bill's head. Bill was murdered by a coward who, when asked why he did not shoot from the front, said he did not want to commit suicide. Although Wild Bill did kill many men, he was not a murderous person. On the contrary, he killed only in self-defense and to preserve law and order.

THE END

★ A RANGER'S DARING ★

ONE of the best marshals the little town of El Paso ever had was James B. Gillett, an ex-sergeant of the Texas Rangers.

The cold-blooded murder of a New-Mexican newspaper editor had caused a great deal of talk. Abran and Enofrio Baca, were known to have committed the crime.

After picking up Abran, Gillett learned that Enofrio had made his way across the border. He was last seen in the town of Saragosa, Mexico. There was no hope of getting the man by diplomatic negotiations. Somehow Enofrio would hear of the negotiations and disappear.

There was only one way to get the killer. Gillett intended to kidnap the killer without the knowledge of his superior officers—who would be forced to prevent him from carrying out this mission if they knew. One of his own men whom he could trust accompanied him. Both of them knew that if anything went wrong they could be court-martialed for insubordination.

They rode past the border on their quest, over tricky mountain paths, and steep trails. Finally they reached Saragosa. Gillett's companion held the horses while the Ranger entered the store where Enofrio was working

The killer was caught by surprise. When Gillett walked in, he was measuring some goods for an elderly Mexican woman. Gillett, covering him with his gun, ordered him to raise his hands and walk ahead of him out of the store. There was no opportunity for an exchange of gunfire. Enofrio was forced to comply. When they reached the horses, Gillett ordered the killer to mount behind his own man where he could keep an eye on him so that no move to escape on the long ride home would escape detection.

A great deal of excitement arose in the town when the news of Enofrio's capture spread. The church bell began to clang and men jumped into their saddles to take part in the chase. A posse pursued them to a river ford firing as they rode. There they gave up and returned to the village.

Gillett put his captain in a difficult position. He was proud of his man, and yet such an abuse of authority had to be reprimanded. The wayward sergeant was given a stiff lecturing by his Captain, and then was sent to Socorro, New Mexico, with his prisoner.

Sentiment had grown in the community following the runaway of the killers. The crime had been considered an outrage, but the intense feeling had gotten entirely out of hand. With the arrival of Enofrio, the authorities were unable to hold back the fiery mob which surrounded the jail. Within three hours of Gillett's arrival with the prisoner, the jail was invaded and the prisoners lynched.

Gillett had a brilliant record as a Texas Ranger and continued to live up to it as a deputy United States Marshal.

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The second is that he doesn't care if he *does* look like a castoff scarecrow.

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SONS OF THE WEST

WILD BILL HICKOK

Of all the legendary characters of the West, Wild Bill is perhaps leader of the ranks of the quick-shot artists. It has been said that no man on earth could have bested Wild Bill with a gun of any kind. Unnumbered times he was faced by armed men, as many as nine at a time, and never came off second best. To have a gun in hand when facing Wild Bill was to sign your own death warrant. Yet he never used his amazing skill except in the interests of justice. He was ever on the side of law and order, and he died in that capacity, from a bullet in the back. (Story on page 176.)